Where Winds Curve

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Where Winds Curve

by DottedHarlequinShrimp

Summary

Miles wakes up at six on the dot. His routine, carved in stone, is followed with military rigor. He turns off the lighthouse, fills the climate surveillance papers and reports them to the bureau; walks without aim or objective until six P.M, when he is required to turn the light on again.

At some point during the night, his eyelids slip closed. He catches what few hours of sleep he can, so tomorrow he may check another box on the government-issued calendar.

This is what he wanted, wasn't it?

Notes

Hello. As you can see I am unable to sit still, thus here I am with yet another megalomaniacal project (I've actually had this in my docs for a while to be honest) and back with my mermaid Phoenix spiel – though there are a few differences.

Fun fact, in my mother language (portuguese) there is this idiom "onde o vento faz a curva" (roughly translated to "where the wind makes the curve") that we sometimes use to refer to somewhere very far away. I just messed with the translation to make it sound better and that's where the title comes from.

Marginally inspired by the movie "the lighthouse" (that one starring robert pattingson) but less about going crazy and isolation and more about interpersonal relationships (the plural is important), regret and existential crises.

Also, because of the way I tweaked the events of the game to fit the historical period, there will be a lot of politics involved and many times my views will bleed into the narrative, so be warned.

And last thing before the fic, please remember that I am always open to criticism. You are free to leave critique on the comments.

How to spot a canary

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Miles wakes up. He disrobes of his sleepwear and downs his usual garb, squinting at the day outside; grey, as always. The wooden floorboards moan under the heavy weight of his boots strutting through the house while he snuggles deeper into the thick coat, willing it to heat, and waits for the fog on the lenses of his glasses to dissipate.

He flips the calendar, revealing the current date. Thursday, April 23rd, 1964. At least, he thinks it is; more often than not one or two days are lost due to him forgetting to turn a page. Either way, if today's the penultimate Thursday, he should ready himself and head out to collect this month's shipment and, hopefully, the requested books if Gumshoe was graceful enough to remember them for once. The grumbling of his stomach is quelled by a few crackers and what remained of yesterday's fish strips, which he is still munching on as the door closes behind him.

The waves crashing below and the crunching of short grass beneath his feet are his only companions as he walks the everyday fifty meters to the lighthouse. His keys jingle when he turns the lock, pushing open the weighty metallic slab his employers had the audacity to call a 'door'. A spiraling staircase up, and the clockwork is stopped; another small ladder guides him into the slowing Fresnel lens and, at the push of a switch, the Bunsen flame is extinguished – the light along with it.

His eyes now safe from being scorched by the potent beam, he exits the lens' insides and descends the ladder, stepping onto the platform, walking into the narrow catwalk – taking from a pocket inside his coat a bundle of printed papers and his beloved fountain pen. Nearby landmarks are visible, no mist or rain curtaining their silhouettes. The clouds suspended above are homogenous, the same shade extending until where his sight reaches. The waves are small and gentle, the sea's surface still and placid. All that information is jotted down, filled reports tucked away into their place.

The lightkeeper is pretty sure this familiar routine can be followed through with closed eyes and not suffer any loss in quality or chronology, as deeply engraved the daily repetition is in the grooves of his brain. He locks the entry, which will not see him again until the sky is dark blue and the guiding light is to appear once more.

Afterwards, he fetches an utility cart from a nearby shed and begins the hike down until the dock, where Gumshoe's boat is to moor soon.

For a little more than a year now, Miles has been the sole inhabitant of Hornos Island, a small portion of terrain roughly 120 kilometers south of the Tierra del Fuego, serving as the keeper for the local lighthouse. He has three purposes here: operate the lighthouse to help ships not to stray from their route, fill the weather reports to be sent to the meteorology bureau and, since the sisters who lived in the lookout house a few kilometers away left some months prior to his arrival, the task of monitoring marine species has also fallen in his hands.

The distinct silhouette of a modest ship is already visible, overlapping the greys. It should finish anchoring by the time Miles reaches the pier.

Once a month, Gumshoe and his ragtag group of sailors come all the way South from the Magellan Strait to bring him provisions and whatever else the keeper solicits. It would just be better if the bumbling captain put in the effort of mastering Morse Code – he is aware the man is merely used to more modern means of communication, but it does not fall on him that the Navy didn't deign his lowly post worthy of any wireless device more up-to-date than a mid 1940s telegraph.

Despite the man's extroverted nature and Miles's aversion to human interaction as a whole, the lightkeeper has learned to appreciate and look forward to the monthly visits. Regardless of their apparent obliviousness to the concept of quietness and personal space, they are respectful – and Miles's only contact with others of his kind.

Though, that is far from being a problem. In fact, it's the very reason that drove the keeper to choosing this job. After the whole predicament with Von Karma, everything Miles wanted was to go far, *far* away from it all. And – with the exception of the Diego Ramírez Islands, but those already had their job positions filled and the workers wouldn't budge – what better place than here? A remote location in the middle of nothing, practically on the other side of the world from Germany?

When, through the grapevine, he heard that the Chilean government was about to inaugurate the globe's southernmost lighthouse, hurry is not enough to describe the state he was in to put an end to his affairs and apply for the position.

He gathered his most cherished possessions, which didn't amount to more than several books and a few precious trinkets, and sent his application. The rest is history.

Sturdy wood creaks underneath his shoes. "Mr. Edgeworth!" Maggey Byrde shouts, waving frantically at him from her precarious perch on one of the ship's edges. Miles lifts his hand in greeting, watching as Mike Meekins's head pokes up from behind some crates and Lana Skye exits the wheelhouse.

A few moments later, Meekins throws him the mooring line, which Miles ties to the nearest pole. The boat comes to a halt, and Gumshoe is the first to jump out.

"Mr. Edgeworth, pal!" As is customary, he tries to ensnare the keeper in one of his signature bear hugs and, as is also customary, Miles expertly slithers away from the motion. "I was missing you already, y'know that?"

"Yes, Gumshoe. I seem to recall you saying that exact same line every time we meet."

The captain nods sagely. "Yeah, yeah, that's because it's true." Behind him, the others begin to work on unloading the cargo. "I don't understand how you can live here, Mr. Edgeworth. Don't you feel lonely?"

Miles turns his eyes to the horizon, to its colors that are simple, varied tones of grey, taking in the melancholic sight. The color is reflected by the sea with perfection equivalent to that of a

crystal mirror, calm today as it rarely is, and the horizon, the line that bisects the paisaje and separates the planes, is barely discernible. The product is a discolored infinity, void of anything that doesn't swim beneath or flies above.

"Sometimes."

Gumshoe seems ready to speak something unbearably cheesy that sounds wise in the almost-as-empty expanses of his skull when Lana approaches with a bundle of newspapers, interrupting her captain before he could get a word in edgewise.

"Good morning, Edgeworth. Here are the news, from March 13th to April 16th." She says, and unceremoniously drops the heap in his arms. Miles doesn't feel particularly affected by the apparent rudeness; he tolerates – maybe even likes – Lana. Much like him, she was caught trapped in the middle of a cesspool of corruption, and decided to abandon the world of law and politics, replacing it with the seas of the South instead.

They are known for being treacherous, yawning depths that swallow life without any mercy. But even then, both Miles and Lana can agree they're less dangerous and easier to navigate than humanity's affairs.

"Thank you, Ms. Skye."

She shoots him a small smile before joining her group. The amount of boxes on the cart indicates they should be close to finishing by now. "Well," Gumshoe speaks, scratching his head. "It seems we're already almost over. Uh, I should say we brought the books you wanted, but the money you gave us wasn't enough for 'The Metamorphosis' in German as per your request, so we got the good ol' english translation. Things from across the sea are kinda expensive."

That's a pity, but alright. It's on him for not calculating better, although it is difficult to do so when he can't keep an eye on the market prices.

"That's fine, Gumshoe. I'll have to thank you for the consideration."

The man flashes him a toothy grin and finger pistols. "Don't sweat it, pal."

Not much after, the crew is once more reunited on the deck, and Miles unties the mooring line, flinging it again into the waiting hands of Meekins. Gumshoe and Lana disappear into the wheelhouse. The ship's engine sputters alive seconds later.

"Bye! Till next month, Mr. Edgeworth!" Maggey shouts enthusiastically whilst Meekins waves. The lightkeeper waits until the group is occupied with their respective tasks and the boat has left earshot to start the trek back home.

In his first trimester here, hurling a full cart up the hill of considerable slope that rises from the dock to his house was what seemed an Herculean task tailored specifically for him. His previous job as a prosecutor wasn't the most… physically stimulating, so to speak. Due to his physical incompetence, an entire hour of his day was squandered in merely dragging the cursed thing around, sweating like a pig and panting like a dog.

He's grateful that, after some time, he developed the necessary physique for managing activities such as this without suffering from the deep pain and fatigue that used to plague him following these sorts of efforts. So, twenty minutes later sees him filling nearly empty cupboards with canned goods and arranging the newly acquired volumes in his study, fitting them into the neat rows of spines. As the last slides into place he sits in front of the telegraph and retrieves the paper with today's climate information, transcribing it into dots and lines to be carried to the respective authorities.

When he's done, a certain very used, very handy tome on the marine wildlife of America's extreme South is retrieved from its shelf.

Besides collecting the shipment, today also bears another activity, albeit a much more unpleasant one: surveil the marine wildlife. His assignment is simple: head over to a mandrel over the cliff, row up the net that rests submerged on the sea below and count how many individuals of each species have been caught in the trap. That is a biweekly event, and every two months he is to communicate his findings to the Chilean Navy, who will then forward the results to independent researchers interested in the potential profitability of fishing in the extreme South. Despite his employers making a big fuss over the importance of this ignoble task, Miles doubts anyone has ever touched his reports since they were first sent.

Unfortunately for him, abiding by the rules is a behavior intrinsic to his character; if that is a requirement of the job, no matter how ingrate, he is doing it.

Of the cargo, what's left to put away are the newspapers. Miles smoothens them out and crafts a neat pile, leaving it over the table with the intent of reading through them later.

A foul smell descends over him. His nostrils are assaulted by the phantom stench of putrefying meat, and he backtracks. A bit of procrastination isn't known to have killed – that can't be said of direct contact with deceased animals.

The lightkeeper skims through the stack, looking for any headlines that stand out, determined on wasting a few additional minutes before having to subject himself to the scent of fish for dismayingly prolonged windows of time, inevitable and irksome as it is.

March 16th, 'Government measures in health and education approved by president Lyndon B. Johnson. The War on Poverty begins.'

He'll have to read this with attention. It seems fantastic, but Miles is painfully aware these deeds seldom are what they look like on the surface, and a cursory, inattentive glance can obscure the truth hiding beneath.

March 20th, 'European Space Research Organization founded by group of brilliant specialists. The ESRO shines.'

Sometimes, Miles thinks it's funny that humanity seems so hellbent on launching these enormous, idealistic endeavors to explore space when what's right here is barely known.

March 27th, 'Alaskan earthquake measured at a magnitude of 9.2 on the Richter scale leaves at least 100 dead.'

The sentence causes a quaver to run down his spine, his own, personal earthquake rattling his bones. He jumps to the next without dedicating a single millisecond more to thinking about it.

April 1st, ‘Brazil suffers second Coup d’état in a period of fifty years. Military dictatorship rises.’

Poor brazilians. Twice in less than half a century must be rough.

April 8th, ‘Gemini I, America’s unmanned spacecraft, is deemed a tremendous success. The Soviets are left to eat (cosmic) dust.’

At that, Miles’s nose wrinkles. He has borne witness to many not very ethical measures employed in this war as well as their direct results, and just its mention is enough to sour his mood.

April 14th, ‘Tatyana Afanasyeva, entropy genius, passes away at 56.’

That’s a big loss for science. Miles has had the pleasure of striking short chats with Tatyana during a few diplomatic encounters between the Soviet Union and the States, and she was a truly eximious physicist; the title ‘entropy genius’ is not unwarranted.

With that, he reaches the end. Sighing, the lightkeeper switches the newspapers for his thick volume of South Chilean Marine Wildlife: A Complete Catalog, a book compiling every macro-species found and described on the world’s southernmost islands until its conception, illustrations filling every blank space on thick pages. The most thorough guide he could find.

Grabbing his worst pen and a blank sheet of paper in passing, he moves the few dozen meters to the winch. There, he grabs the wooden rod with both fists – shivering at the cold that manages to seep into his very being even through the gloves – and spins the axle.

It is heavy, more so than usual; he must have captured something big, and the prospect of a salarial bonus for total weight caught rings nicely in his head. With a few grunts littered throughout, he manages to suspend the net, and sees something that makes his calm countenance turn grim, the extra money at the end of the month now a sure lie.

Tangled on the ropes is what seems to be a human torso, chest pressed against the net and one arm lifelessly dangling out. Miles grimaces; it wouldn’t be the first time some unlucky soul’s body ended up in the trap – these waters are perilous and extremely accident prone after all – but it is still a situation with a distinct, acrid tang to it that he doesn’t think will ever lose its morbidity.

Some more effort later the net has been successfully brought to land, where it is opened to allow him access to the specimens.

He blinks, and tilts his head aside, wondering if his surroundings are an illusion and he hasn’t woken up in the morning, because there is no other rational explanation but that this is a – strangely realistic and lucid – dream. Yes, as he suspected it is a human upper half, semi-obscured by the masses of dead and squirming animals. However, he could never have

anticipated the big, guileless blue-brown eyes *attached* to said upper half, which stare back at him with a mixture of fear and shock. Emotions that, Miles is sure, are reflected in his own.

An unbearable albeit unbreakable tense silence forms between them when even the winds stop howling, interrupted solely by the shuddering of dying fish. Miles is crouching down, hands hovering in the air, frozen. The man is deathly still, nothing in his body indicating life but the spark in his irises.

In a brusque movement, he rolls back, and the lightkeeper can only catch a glimpse of what looks like an enormous fish tail annexed to his waist before he spins over the edge.

Abruptly very awake, Miles rises and runs, hearing a resounding splash as the mysterious person collides with the water's surface. Perched on the verge of the precipice, he catches a single glimpse of a flash of lighter blue zooming away and deeper into the sea before it fully disappears.

That is much too fast for any cold water fish. What is it doing here? The nearest warm current is the Brazilian one, a considerable 2000 nautical miles away. Unless it was on the South Equatorial current and strayed a bit too far, ending up caught by the Pacific Circle that threw it in the West Wind Drift, which would explain how it wound up here. Or maybe the Pacific waters are too *warm? There* is *an unnatural amount of typhoons happening, and even warm water fish have been reported fleeing from areas too hot…*

And then it clicks. None of that actually matters, no feasible hypothesis could possibly be obtained, because what he just saw is a *mermaid.*

A… mermaid.

Half-human, half-fish. What else could it have been? But that's impossible; mermaids are folklore beings, popularized and romanticized by the parasitical children-focused companies to wrench more money out of exhausted parents.

And yet, Miles just witnessed one. In the flesh, fins, scales and all.

Maybe Gumshoe is right, and the isolation is doing some irreversible damage to his brain, to the point he is projecting humanity onto animals.

Glaring at the corpses that remain in the net, some quiet, some spasming, none even by far reminding him of a human being, he sits down and proceeds with his job, keeping a keen eye out for any other abnormalities and only fully relaxing when the sun sets and nothing else worthy of note happens.

Days afterwards, regardless of his many attempts at diversions – which are limited to aimlessly strolling and indiscriminate reading – his mind refuses to let go of that strange encounter, gnawing on it like a dog with its bone. Hence why, a week later, he finds himself meandering through the faded path connecting his house to the old lookout post, at the island's far East.

Miles has gone there, times past. Twice. Once when he was given a ‘tour’ of the island by the begrudging worker doing definitely far more hours than he was being paid for, and the next on his own during his first week at the job out of pure curiosity.

He never quite liked the place. Despite not being superstitious, Miles hates how the loneliness that plagues him everywhere in this island somehow dissipates inside the decrepit shack. It’s the kind of building where there are always observing gazes, but their owners are elusive, sneaky, skirting out of his peripheral vision before he is able to catch a glimpse.

Nevertheless, that’s where Miles’s headed to.

The hike is roughly four kilometers long, so the lightkeeper, used to the uneven terrain, is able to clear it in just under an hour and a half. It is around early afternoon, the sky at its brightest, blinding white when he at last reaches the cabin, greyish spots dancing on the ground as sunlight seeps from between the wrecked ceiling boards. Miles scans the shed, but it’s still exactly the same as when he’s last been here a year ago, if not more in ruins. Taken over by a strong feeling of longing, its origins unidentifiable, he looms around as an idle fly, scouring the ruins, finding nothing but what was already known, what has been there since his arrival. Sniffing as the mold blackening the walls tickles his nostrils, he rummages through the stones and their exotic shapes, scraps of ornate fabric eaten away by moths and fragments of ancient pottery.

Frustration grows inside his chest. It is a mystery he can't uncover, his expectations or what he was looking for when he set off – but it certainly wasn’t *this.* Why is he even here in the first place? It was obvious no changes would be found – he is the only person in this blasted island.

Yes, the *only;* precisely what he wished for.

Irritated, he defers a powerful kick to one of the walls, breaking the wood and creating another escape for the air current. A sudden gust of cold wind hits him directly despite the enclosed space, as if life itself was slapping his face in reprimand for so grossly disrespecting what once must’ve been someone’s beloved home.

With a scoff directed at nothing in particular, he returns to his house, berating himself for indulging such unnecessary feelings.

Still, something uncomfortably close to guilt gnaws at his innards. What is he doing here? What is his goal, what he’s expecting to achieve by running from his past and leaving his demons behind instead of exorcizing them? He is not only taking the coward’s way out, making others have to clean his mess, as he’s destroying *more,* made evident by the image of newly broken wood. No matter how much he flees, a trail of ruins is left in his path, and he can’t seem to run fast enough to lose it; his nightmares, for their part, forbid him from relishing on the bliss of ignorance – an everynight reminder of what he shot dead with his childish, incapable hands.

To abandon it all. That’s everything he wanted. To, like a snake, go through the blessed process of ecdysis and be reborn, new and *better.* Yet, he got caught in his own shedding, twined inside a rotting wrapping that was supposed to be disposed of.

Is this how he's going to die? Tangled in his own skin of damnation, remembered as nothing more than the tragic and distasteful case of a man who asphyxiated in his wrongdoings; his story a withering page in a secluded corner of a museum, looked at with pitying disgust and forgotten minutes after? Or even worse, choke in the middle of nowhere and not be remembered *at all?*

Childhood memories return in a flood, tinged with bitterness rather than nostalgia. Grandiose dreams of greatness, of hopping over the indents of his father's footsteps and leaving a legacy of doing good to the world.

Yet, here he is. Currently just another name to be spoken with disdain by the hundreds of people he wronged; forgotten as shriveling fruit after those are gone. At best, relegated to a bitter footnote in history books. At worst, have his corpse and memory burned away.

He needs to do something. Before the world keeps spinning without him by no fault but of his own inaction. There must be some pathway to take, a mechanism to stop Earth for him if he isn't going to be taken along.

He needs to atone for his mistakes.

Three more weeks of monotony fly by, and again the calendar marks the month's penultimate Thursday.

The usual song and dance is dutifully followed, though with a few minor changes. Of which, by far the most important is Maggey announcing a pregnancy, while Gumshoe blushes profusely by her side.

In what is a rare gesture, kept safely guarded and only brought out for these special occasions, Miles offers them a small but genuine smile. The couple responds with their own set of blinding beams and launch in a tirade over the baby's name, clothing, toys, and everything else a duo waiting for a child babbles about. The lightkeeper watches with unusual warmth and a degree of amusement; it is not difficult to imagine the chaotic – albeit happy – life those two and their kid could lead.

They bid the keeper goodbye, and he, as per usual, stands by on the dock until the ship turns into naught but a distant dot in the horizon.

Sighing, he prepares himself for the oncoming physical effort, loathing the hellish angle the ground rises at. That's the instant a familiar pair of shining eyes chooses to pop over the surface, between a couple rocks and amid white seafoam.

At this point, Miles had successfully managed to banish his strange meeting as kindling into a proverbial fireplace, ashes swept by the breeze. But now, confronted by those sparkling

mismatched colors, he finds himself wide-eyed and stunned, overwhelmed both by the sight and by that soot being thrown at his face as strong winds whip at his front.

Lengthful, torturing seconds pass by with nary a blink from either party until the mermaid is, once again, the first to make a move.

Slowly and warily, it emerges, carrying a dead fish in its mouth. Miles immediately takes note of its ebony hair, slicked back in spikes, a lone strand bobbing on its forehead. For hydrodynamics, perhaps?

As it gingerly claws its way up and over the stony shore – gaze pinned to him as if *Miles* was the dangerous, unknown animal who could lash out at a moment's notice – more and more of its body is revealed. Talon-like nails dig into the rocks, providing anchoring. Small fins are in place of ears, pointed and regal, nearly like a crown. What seems to be a relaxed crest-adjacent fin runs down from the back of its neck till the tail's first fifth. And the *tail.* Long, powerful, strong and *vibrant.* Of an iridescent dark blue Miles has only ever seen on the deepest waters of Bikini Atoll, littered with blotches of brown and streaks of gold that are akin to painting strokes, almost blinding under the sunlight.

The keeper barely realizes the merman is steadily approaching. Just when it lifts a hand to wrap around the fish's cauda and brandish it to Miles does the human snap back into reality.

Reality, which, by now, he isn't very sure is *real.*

His own fingers encircle the animal, caution permeating the motion so it turns sluggish, and it is transferred to his hold.

What might this be? A truce? A token of trust? There are many explanations for behaviors of the kind in nature, and he has no idea which of them have the right shape to fit this puzzle. Nonetheless, appearing reassured at the acceptance of its offer, the merman untenses, using its newly freed limb to wipe the blood off of its face. It briefly scowls when, instead of being cleaned, the viscous liquid is relocated to the blue webbing between its digits.

When its stare is turned to the lightkeeper again, its wide, glimmering eyes only reflect innocence, as it tilts his head aside in discernible expectation. The nurturing or severing of this interaction is up to Miles.

"I-I," He stutters for a bit, and abandons that train of thought entirely. "Can you speak?" Is what he ends up saying, even if that's his *last* possible concern at present moment. Instantly, he wants to kick himself for the sheer stupidity of that question.

Although, to his utter bafflement, the merman *does* speak.

Its index finger points to its mouth while its lips move uncertainly, and genuine, comprehensible words close the gap between them.

"Speech… Not good." The digit moves to signal its ears, or, at least, what likely are ears. "I hear well."

Miles is left astonished, concomitantly horrified and fascinated by this intriguing creature. It's a mystery, a question the universe has thrown at him to solve, reigniting the flames of his will to find the truth. He stares at it, dissecting it the best he can without the aid of appropriate instruments, attempting an analysis of its insides in search of any answers that might hide in its gut.

When he focuses back on its expression, the merman's features are creased, anxiety-stricken. The lightkeeper realizes he let the quiet amidst them extend uncomfortably. He brings a fist up, clearing his throat. "Alright. So, what you wish to express is that you are mostly unable to speak, but are capable of understanding what I say?"

It nods. Miles clutches the cart's rope tighter, until the twirling shape is imprinted in his palms.

Never, in the six continents of this Earth, in the farthest locations he has visited, in the most confidential information he has been privy to, has Miles ever seen something even remotely similar to this. He feels like he has found a treasure, discovered a myth whose jeweled shine can rival the Sun itself, while being stranded on a deserted island. What is he to do with it? What *can* he do with it? There is nothing an abandoned man can do with gold but drag it around, and that's simply exhausting.

The merman is clearly waiting for further comment; maybe an order, or another inquiry. On a whim, feeling pressured by these idiosyncratic circumstances – that could have been directly taken from a drunkard's feverish dream – and the lack of any distinguishable course of action, Miles follows the first coherent thought to cross his mind: he whirls around to march back.

A high-pitched sound – something like a chirp, thick with surprise – echoes from behind, prefacing clumsy shuffling that drags unskillfully over rocks and against grass.

Internally reviewing all the life choices that led him here – and cutting that path down before it could spiral into insanity, his objective in this island is squarely *not* think about them – he turns and starts walking, attentive to the merman's lumbering noises as it follows on its elbows and forearms.

Miles wonders, breathing the cold air, letting his lungs expand to their largest before exhaling, if this is what going mad is. He meets a mythical creature that, by all means should not exist, that is the antithesis of everything he believes in, and shows little to no reaction. Purely because of a little voice, some nonsensical feeling whispering that, were he to panic and send the creature away, he would be losing something important.

He pulls the cart into the house. The merman halts at the entryway, peeking through the door frame, contrition clear in its face. Miles ignores its presence.

Wordless, he sets to organize this month's provisions, following his routine as if he was alone – like he was supposed to be. It takes several minutes for a questioning whimper to reach his ears and, receiving absolute silence in answer, it carefully crawls inside. A pair of blue-brown eyes bore intermittent holes on his skull during the quarter hour taken to put everything away, and at the end of it, in the cart only linger the newspapers to scan through and the wooden boards; exceptionally solicited this month and to be stored in the nearby shack later.

He directs his attention to the creature, who seems to shrink under his gaze. What is it doing here? Why does it follow him? Did it regret offering its food to Miles when confronted by his rudeness, and wants the fish returned?

The lightkeeper fetches the body from a shelf in the fridge and, certifying that the merman's gaze is fixed on him, throws the corpse away with as much strength as he can muster. It does react – hurt, loud and unmistakable glints in its eyes. But it doesn't pursue the animal; instead, it spindles that glittery, upset gaze to Miles, accusing arrows that dig into his flesh. The keeper restrains the irrational urge to apologize.

With a quick parting glance thrown at his unwitting consort, he wheels the cart across the door.

During the lulling push and pull motions of loading the boards onto an empty space in the repository, he can't quite shake off the strangeness of this whole state of affairs, nor the merman's unwanted company. It has chased Miles out of the house and now hovers near the shed's entryway, occasionally spying inside with that wide, naive gaze and those slitted, predatory eyes.

Incessant staring feels like sharp needles, poking at him, burrowing in his nape as his whole body quivers with the prickling behind his neck. What does it want? Miles doesn't have anything of value to give or for it to rob – everything he had has been left behind. It couldn't wish to injure him either; it had ample opportunity, none of them acted upon. There were plenty of instances where the keeper was in a vulnerable position, and without his trusted shotgun he knows he is unable to match those keen claws; despite that – the plethora of perfect chances – it didn't attack.

Regardless of how much he tries to unravel this mystery, puzzle out this surreal being's intentions, it all feels like trying to put together a fixture while lacking its pieces. So, in his brief break for lunch – a few crackers he had in hand, reluctant to leave this comforting place with that thing loitering outside – he takes the next best action, and shuts down. Lets it all seep through the holes in his mind and cascade into the sea to be dealt with later, or completely wash away.

As the last *clack* sounds, dark shades of gray already color the cloudy sky. Kerosene jar in one hand, the bundle of newspapers in the other, Miles smoothly undergoes the usual routine of fueling the light, winding up the clockwork assembly, and nursing the flame into stability. This time, he breaks the usual flow once; he closes the door behind him, feigning ignorance to the whimper that sounds from a few feet away and penetrates through steel.

The contraption comes to life with an unsteady flickering – soon balanced into a stable light by his skillful tinkering –, and Miles takes a moment to close his eyes, inhale the scent of fuel, and hear the familiar crackling. Basking in the normalcy this activity provides, the only section of his life those claws can't reach, left blissfully untouched. Put fuel. Wind it up. Turn on. Turn off. Put fuel. Wind it up…

Taking advantage of the potent light coming from above, he settles on the internal edge of the platform and decides there's no better time to give the recent news a read.

April 17th, ‘Women in the skies! Geraldine ‘Jerrie’ Mock is the first woman to complete a solo flight around the world.’

In one word, impressive. Miles has to admit he is glad for the many feats achieved and rights revindicated by women in recent years. It gives him hope Franziska can one day escape her father’s shadow and conquer everything she aspires to. She is an exceptional woman, and deserves much more than being forever trapped behind his figure only because her father is so obsessed with his ideal of a ‘proper heir’ it blinds him to her brilliance.

April 26th, ‘Tanganyika and Zanzibar officially merged; the United Republic of Tanganyika and Zanzibar is born.’

He can’t say he has kept a close eye on Eastern African Politics; every lens in the world is turned to the United States of America and the Soviet Union. Still, he heard from word of mouth of the revolution taking place in Zanzibar. Sometimes he wishes he could be as brave as these people are and be an agent of change, instead of running with his tail tucked between his legs at the first sign of conflict.

May 5th, ‘The socialist threat in Canada; Separatist Quebecer movement RIN riots against Queen Elizabeth II’s visit.’

Miles can’t really blame them. He would riot if Elizabeth II came to his island too. The things he has seen done in the name of the Crown during his times in England would be sufficient to make any person with a beating heart grow profound disdain towards the Royal Family. The disgusting cesspool flowing in the sewers hidden beneath the Palace is something he does not wish to touch with a ten-foot pole.

May 15th, ‘Bomb Minnow dropped by the US in the Nevada Test Site in continuity of Operation Niblick.’

Atomic bombs are one of humanity’s most foolish quests. Intensive search for something as menial as upholding superiority – a perfect field to grow and harvest a tension that weighs and chokes as much as a mushroom cloud. Creating and maintaining an endless anthropophagic cycle where people are incentivized to disregard empathy and eat each other regardless of their peers' innocence or lack thereof. And Miles can still feel the acrid taste it has left in his mouth.

The realization he was participating as a perpetrator of that wretched ourobouro’s existence, that he was endlessly chewing on the end of the snake’s tail, hurting from the teeth clamping around his own, is what drove Miles so far from the rest of his kind.

Sometimes, his wandering mind unearths *those* questions, like a dog that, no matter how hard, how *far* you’ve thrown the ball, keeps bringing it back. Is it possible that it is *him* that is the problem? Is the destruction not a malevolence haunting him, but *himself?* Is he doomed to forever bring wreckage wherever he goes, not because it is tethered to him by whatever curse, but because it is ingrained in his very soul?

Maybe it is. Maybe it is not. Miles has already wrenched his heart out of its place in his chest, and if that didn’t solve the problem, then no other possible option will. At the end of the day,

attaining an answer or not is indifferent. Now, he is here, stranded in isolation, where there is nothing for him to ruin.

Reassured in his convictions and feeling more grounded than he has all day, the lightkeeper returns, overlooking the long shadow at his heels. The door creaks and whimpers loudly as it gives way, reminding him to oil up the hinges come sunrise. As he is sliding it shut, he catches a hint of deep blue peering at him, and slams the door closed, aiming to sever that disconcerting stare causing shivers to ripple down his spine.

The night is still young, the moon having just risen above the horizon. He flicks the switch on and leaves amber light behind, creaking wood filling the silence as he stalks down the hallway. In his room, the curtains are pulled closed – a lone streak of moonlight is cast over the nightstand, illuminating a specific title in silvery paint. He lingers for a moment, softly tracing the many places on the cover of his fabric-bound edition of 'Tess of the d'Urbervilles' where stray strings reach out to him. It's the book he recalls his father would always take from his hands, *'maybe when you're older'*.

Unfortunately, when he reached the stipulated age, his father wasn't able to give him the go ahead anymore. Since then, he has spent uncountable hours over the yellowed pages, dissecting the narrative, carefully picking apart the characters, their qualities, flaws – how each piece pushes the story forward. One of the few aspects of his past he clung tightly to when under his mentor, one of the most important to the 'him' of today. Cradling the loved volume, he returns to the comfort of warm yellow, making himself comfortable on the armchair he had to fight with the Navy to bring home.

Cracking the tome open, he removes the gold-pleated bookmark Franziska gifted him with a slight smile. It sits on the coffee table, opposite position to Miles, who is comfortably reclined on the sofa, losing himself amidst the rows of letters yarning a tragic tale, immersed on Tess's mind as if it was his own. He doesn't notice the turning of pages, not the irritating ticking of the old pendulum clock hung on the wall, nor the steady climb of the moon, higher and higher on the inky blackness.

Silver competes with orange, trying to gain territory inside the house. The moon has always been a vigorous fighter – strong streaks of its silvery-blue light attempt to consume the artificial yellow that emanate from an incandescent bulb, the contraption dangling precariously on the ceiling. It can't outcompete mankind's creation, but it illuminates the creature hounding around. The shine rebounds on its tail to hit Miles's eyes, makes smooth claws twinkle, deepens the complexions of mismatched irises into the same dark nothingness of the night sky, punctuated only by white dots glimmering as much as the finest jewels.

It stalks him, periodically appearing perched at a window – big, inquisitive eyes glued to the keeper's skull. He tries to forget its presence. It's *unnerving,* to put it mildly. While the loneliness might get to him sometimes, might cause his soul to weep and scratch at his skin from inside out in pursuit of freedom, it is generally what he most appreciates about this island. There is quietude. It is him, the grey sky, the grey sea, the grey grass, and his grey, cold, molding demons. There is no need to stuff skeletons in the closet, due to the complete absence of anyone who could see them. No choking on air when trying to speak. No intangible stabs digging into his chest at accusatory words. No feeling of inadequacy – there

is no society demanding adequacy to be found at this isle at the end of the world. He is alone. Completely, utterly alone, with his light to guide the ships through danger and ward off monsters.

Now, this creature dares to perturb his delicate equilibrium. Dares to break his peaceful solitude, insisting on remaining close when the last thing he wishes for is any company besides his books and the whistling winds that curve along the cliffside.

Persistent, he soon finds the thing to be. It makes itself a nuisance. Tapping its talons on the windows, whining and whimpering like some kind of needy dog, scratching the door and walls; worry spikes within the lightkeeper, because how on Earth is he supposed to explain the resulting grooves to his employers? The damages will surely be discounted from his wage.

When he realizes it, his focus has shifted from the pages he looks at to the being outside, cataloging each sound, spying from the corners of his eyes whenever it peeps inside. He isn't the only one to notice the pivoting of his attention; the ruckus it causes has a sudden increase in volume, and Miles relents.

He rests his palm above the door knob for a hesitant millisecond. He will come to regret it, that's a certainty – but, in spite of his better judgment, he opens the door.

Dark eyes meet his from beneath. It rests in front of him, pushing back against Miles's scornful gaze with nothing but care and good intentions. The keeper hopes his scowl, which he has been told is more powerful than the threat of a drawn pistol, will cause it to double-think its objective and retreat.

Predictably, it doesn't.

Heaving a frustrated sigh, Miles steps back and drags the door along to allow it passage. As if to further annoy him, it doesn't immediately come in. No, instead it has to micro analyze every aspect of the new environment, stretching its long neck to catch a whiff of within, then pressing its nose close to the jamb, the doorstep, and the floor nearby. The process takes much longer than the time he was willing to concede in the first place, but finally, after asserting itself of something Miles cannot comprehend, it judiciously puts a hand inside. The first few feet are indecisive – almost laughable; it's been pestering him for the whole day, its intentions aren't going to vanish *now* of all times. It doesn't take long to gain speed, however; in a couple minutes the entire twisted body is painted in golden tones from the hanging lightbulb.

Miles swiftly pushes the door behind it – leaving a gap open in perfunctory expectations that it might withdraw during the night –, giving the curtains a similar treatment to then pick up his book, his bookmark, and dwell further inside. The merman, watching him move, produces a loud 'Hey!' at the sight of Miles disappearing into the hallway.

A shudder causes all his hairs to stand on end, bugs crawling under his skin. He had nearly forgotten the thing could *speak.* Like a person. *Almost* like a person.

Regardless, he inhales a deep, stabilizing breath. Locks himself in his half-office, half-library, and tries not to pay much though to the nagging whispers reminding him of just what he let inside his house.

Overall, he succeeds; his sensibility wore off at some time around mid-afternoon, and the ludicrous notion of sheltering a mythical entity doesn't feel nearly as off-putting as it should. Sinking under an extensive paragraph, Miles doesn't register the pointers trailing around the clock, and his eyelids drooping are what alerts him of the time.

Sure enough, a glance at the clock confirms his suspicions that he was, as always, carried until ungodly hours into the night by a well-spun narrative. He neatly places the bookmark, glowing vividly amidst desaturated surroundings, to abandon the study for his bedroom. To do so, however, he'll need to open the locked door, and he isn't sure what he'll find in the hallway. The thing could be waiting for him in front of the closed entry. It could have contended itself with being banished to the living room. It could even have left the vicinity entirely – although that might be hoping a little too much.

A bad omen settling over him, he turns the knob.

On the other side, there lies darkness.

Well, that's good, he supposes. It has given him respite, for a while at least, as it's absent from every corner his sight reaches. That leaves the prospect of encountering it in his living room, or never at all – which would be the preferred outcome.

Admittedly curious as to the state of his guest, Miles creeps into the aforementioned room. There, he discovers a shadowed lump lying on his couch, conspicuous and seemingly unsuspecting of the other being in the room.

That should be sufficient to quell his investigative urges. He knows it is still here, asleep, not showing any signs it is or could become dangerous. But his fingers twitch in unison with his eyes. So he creeps across the terrifyingly quiet expanse and flips the switch.

The bulb flickers to life and warm light floods the room, rebounding on that gigantic tail, lazily thrown over the couch's armrest.

There, lies the merman, who is curled up but still doesn't quite fit on the furnishing. Its fins droop and splay on the upholstery like a dainty veil, so thin the sofa's pattern is visible through them. They must be deceptively resistant, if they're as intact as appearance indicates in the face of such tempestuous seas.

Its chest rhythmically rises and falls, four pairs of blue crescent moons lined under its pectorals widen and narrow in tandem. Two smaller ones on both sides of its neck follow in synchrony.

Hidden underneath the blanket of warm yellow, marks and scarring marr its honey skin.

Oddly, they look like the product of anthropogenic intervention. An intricate web of pale straight lines he recognises without preamble, concentrated on its back but littered throughout

its whole body, akin to the ones Miles himself sports – albeit in much lesser quantity than the merman. Rougher and discolored patches contained by squiggly borders that cannot have been caused by anything but fire, even though its habitat is the ocean. Painful small circles the lightkeeper has no idea the origins.

He feels the tiny mounds of skin under his digits, skimming over the creature with a feather-light press, wondering about these scars' inception. Various stages of healing are present, some nearly indistinguishable from their surroundings, others an island of red amidst softness.

It shudders in its sleep, a flurry of tiny shivers that ripples down its body, and the waves travel up Miles's fingers, hand, arm, until it reaches his heart and makes the organ stutter to a stop. A freight train of awareness hits him, the abrupt realization he has not only approached the merman as he's actively *touching* it.

The lightkeeper recoils, takes a step back, another and another. He slowly turns around, the fear of waking the thing briefly eclipsing the fear of whatever lapse of judgment he just suffered, and forces himself to be silent while fleeing to his room, heeding to the beckoning of familiar blankets.

Sleep is almost instant, in merciful respite to his frazzled state.

Chapter End Notes

just a clarification: while i did take care to make everything as accurate as possible (except for the news; i did get real events and their actual dates, but the headlines are fabricated) there are a few things i might've gotten mixed up or completely wrong, since i had to do some guesswork. if you have any correction, please do not be shy and put it down in the comments

EDIT: I FORGOR THE COORDINATES. if you want to see where the lighthouse Miles works at is, here are the approximated coordinates: 55°58'38"S 67°15'45"W

I ask you to keep in mind I'm not very sure that's the exact place; I think it is, because there are 2 lighthouses on hornos island, but if you google it the only image that it returns is the most recent. However, the chilean navy itself confirms there was one on the southernmost point of the island that was inaugurated in 1962

The lookout post is where the newer lighthouse was built, at 55°57'48"S 67°13'15"W or just "Cape Horn Lighthouse"

Let go of the rope and fall

Chapter Notes

there will be a few prices mentioned in this chapter. as the inflation rate from 1964 to here is ~917%, every time you see a price multiply it by 10x so you have a more accurate idea of how much that is

also, i was doing some research and found that google has an archive of defunct journals, so everything* related to newspapers from here onwards will be accurate and I'll leave sources on the end notes in case you're interested

*I'll explicitly state on the end notes which parts (such as headlines or articles) are fabricated + since most influential news outlets from that time, such as the NYT, The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal and etc are still alive and strong they aren't included in the archive, and i can't access old clippings bc they force the user to pay for a subscription or outright buy the issues. bc of this i had to gather things from smaller, local journals. will see if i can find an in-world excuse for that, but for now that's how it'll be.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Miles wakes up. Grumbles for a bit, feeling as if his existence in itself was wrinkled, before leaving the bed and registering he isn't comfortable in his nightwear, but wrapped in his usual clothes – albeit now creased to the last fiber.

The floorboards scream under the heavy weight of his boots while he runs to the living room, tugging at the coat's collar in an attempt to cool down and ignoring the irritating smudges on his glasses. What thrums in his veins in place of blood – *desperation,* is a fitting descriptor. The fear that yesterday had been a sick lapse into psychosis, a twist in the fragile fabric of sanity, a craft of his own tired and begging mind.

Hallucination or not, the thing is still on the couch. It lies in much the same position as the previous night, but instead of the incandescent orange flooding the room, a rare beam of yellowed sunlight that penetrates across the curtains bathes its form. Its ears move towards the source of various noises, flitting for a few moments before perking up. It stirs, and Miles tenses in tandem while anticipation courses in his synapses – a thrill that promptly dies out when the merman only sluggishly extends its arms forward, palms open, fingers splayed wide, and stretches under the warmth, not unlike a cat.

A small noise, like a prolonged chirp, cuts the air. He stiffens for a split second until his brain can trace its origins and grey eyes land back on the being – more precisely, on its open maws, as the trill diminishes into a soundless yawn. Fins and limbs and that gigantic tail twist alike,

contorting into positions Miles can't imagine are comfortable but don't seem to bother the creature.

Miles watches, transfixed, while the merman coils itself into a ball again and nuzzles on the upholstery, bringing a half-curled fist to lazily shield its eyes, the rise and fall of its chest slowing down once more.

He is briefly reminded of the old cat that used to laze around the Von Karma's gardens. A fat tabby, fed meal's remains by the servants, of ragged but soft fur that threatened anyone who dared to breach a nine-feet radius from her. A specific memory resurfaces – the day she was discovered by Miles while he meandered through the flowerbeds, laying in a circle over sun-warmed stone as the merman does at this moment. When he sat nearby, the cat jolted, hissed, let her claws slide out and snapped at him. However, when presented with a warm, open palm, she creeped closer. The movement was slow, dubious, prolonged by the long time she spent sniffing his fingers, one by one, searching for indication of danger or safety, everywhere he had gone to and everything he had touched that day. But neither the wait nor the risk were without reward; she stepped forward, curling into his touch, a ragged purr rumbling.

Not long after, he slipped inside the grand library to fetch his then object of study and returned to the bench. He stayed by her side, absently stroking her coat with a hand, bracketing books on the most niche legal knowledge with the other, until night took over and words merged into black.

He clears his throat, louder than necessary – part to gain his consort's attention, part to clear the strange itch within – and observes, after its eyelids flutter apart and its pupils adjust to the light, the exact millisecond in which it registers the other's presence. It's not difficult, truthfully, because its eyes snap almost comically wide and it recoils with an inhuman screech, slamming onto the armrest opposite to the lightkeeper, back arching into a perfect bow and sharp teeth bared in a sneer. The beginnings of what should be a snarl wheeze past canines in a menacing hiss.

The whistle hits him like a punch to the gut. Despite that reaction being an exact portrait of what was anticipated, his first impulse is to recoil, to mirror its motions: sneer and retreat. The ingrate thing plagued him for an entire day, seeking to be allowed inside, and has the gall to have an attitude regarding his presence – for what? For something as innocuous as waking up when he's nearby?

Yet, in spite of his internal objections being not just reasonable but expected from anyone caught in this esoteric situation, the odd impulse to persevere remains. He doesn't budge, sensing the phantom feel of fur nuzzling in his palm.

"Good… Morning?" It comes out as a question, instead of the affirmation he was aiming for. Fortunately, some God has a sudden surge of mercy and awards him some form of an interlude; the merman seems appeased. Gleaming daggers are hidden and the sibilation steadily fizzles out, the faint whisper it was reduced to nigh indistinguishable from the breeze outside. Tension keeping its tanned body coiled tighter than a compressed spring evaporates in a gradual flow, and it is left inquisitively gazing at its human companion.

A sea of possibilities rages inside Miles. Bigger – or, at least, more intriguing – ideas swallowing others, a few that disappear with the seafoam ashore, small fleeting ones swimming through until they vanish into their overpowering siblings. He has to acknowledge denial has never brought him anything of value; while his first impressions on the beast were of irritation, bitterness from such a glaring interruption of his tranquility, the overwhelming majority, softened by the night, is one permeated by interest. His investigative prowess is not something that can be easily trained out, and it demands that he learn more about this strange phenomenon: that he know its name – if it even is named –, where it comes from, what it seeks here, why does it insist on perturbing Miles's carefully woven repose. Battling against the urge to evict it from his domains are a million questions his instincts beg him to obtain an answer for.

In the end, it all dries out, or is calmed for the time being.

"Good… Morning." It answers, a considerable three minutes of awkward staring late. It cranes its neck, to which Miles mimics, and silence has absolute reign. His eyes flit as a fly between that enthralling blue-brown and the elaborate carpet. They slide down, but are lured back up by a hitched breath or a creak of the floor, and that cycle repeats itself for a shameful amount of loops.

He feels that they're frozen, the flow of time in paralysis; the sun outside disagrees. It climbs up the celestial ladder to apprise Miles of the duties he should attend to if he wishes to maintain his employers satisfied and his position safe, but the strange pull seizing his rationale pushes him to speak, to do something to bridge a connection, or impede this frail one from falling apart.

"Would you be interested in breakfast?"

It blinks.

Miles, who can cross wave after punishing wave from these tricky seas of the South far better than social interactions, takes one look at the rusty inner tools that used to guide him through these exchanges and forfeits the future of this conversation to the hands of fate. 'Fate', in these circumstances, standing as synonym to 'the creature'.

"Yesssss?" Said creature hesitantly answers, a hiss extending the word for a few heartbeats. No comments are made, though, while he beckons the being into his kitchen. It is disturbingly silent as it follows him, movements soundless in spite of the hundreds of pounds it has to drag over the floor – a floor that is, not to mention, composed of squeaky boards.

Curiosity lingers, nurtured by every passing moment that serves to add to the enigma of this cryptic entity. It washed on the shore of his life, bright blue and new and so far past the bounds of his knowledge; it is like he is a little child again, exploring the beach with a wet twig in his hand, poking from a safe distance at heaps of algae, dead fish and every unidentified object the sea brings to him.

"Forgive me, I forgot to introduce myself." He leans on the counter. His guest slithers closer, much closer than that stick would allow. "My name is Miles, Miles vo- Edgeworth."

It blinks owlishly at him.

“Your name is?”

Prompted, its spine jolts, as if it had forgotten it is expected behavior for one to introduce himself after another does so. It’s perfectly plausible that it is unfamiliar with social norms in light of its inhuman and isolated nature, though its ability to understand language and, to some extent, speak, tell an opposite tale. A walking – crawling – contradiction, is what it is.

“Phoenix.” The merman enunciates, lips curling around each letter with care, word stretched by a slight hiss at the end, and it says something about Miles that he finds it deeply hilarious a mythical creature of the sea is named after a mythical creature of the sky.

“Alright. And what would be your business here?”

Phoenix remains silent.

Of course, garnering information directly from the source wouldn't be so easy. Sighing, he turns around to delve in his refrigerator and find food to provide. Realization dawns he has no idea of what constitutes a mermaid’s diet.

The biology knowledge he has acquired this last year kicks in – to be precise, that nature rarely is simple happenstance. Taking into consideration several of Phoenix's physical characteristics and behaviors, Miles can hazard with reasonable certainty that he must be a carnivore; if not, at least an omnivore. Everything about him, from adaptable pupils to inches-long claws, stalking devoid of any noise that could alert his target, screams ‘predator’.

Investing in that gamble, the lightkeeper offers one of his best fish as chips. Phoenix analyzes it for too long, the rapt attention of a true player noticeable in his demeanour, and gracefully accepts.

He bites its head off.

Red blooms over the floorboards, steadily dripping from the empty space where the animal’s placid expression was mere heartbeats previously. Miles is paralyzed, staring as Phoenix chews in the calm fashion of a bourgeois relishing the finest banquet.

Seconds later, the merman notices the burning stare. He looks up, and when his pupils meet Miles’s horrified ones, the lightkeeper can confidently affirm Phoenix must be active at night; there is no other feasible reason for him to have eyes that big. The munching stops while they are locked in position, so deep in each other’s eyes it is a near certainty Phoenix can see every thought that flits behind his irises. The being, then, brings the decapitated corpse to his mouth once more and rips another piece off, taking the bones and flaccid organs along. He quietly masticates, piercing blue-brown not once straying away from the appalled grey.

“I’ll-” Miles begins, and stops. “I think-” He shuts himself up again.

“Alright.” Gloved fingers come up to his temples, pressing certain pieces and parts in hopes he will hit the buttons that’ll force his brain back into proper functioning. He looks at the red

staining his floor, at Phoenix's lips that are similarly smattered, then at the grey gathering outside that reflects in likewise colored irises.

"I ask you, please, not to eat inside. It's not an easy task to clean blood off of wood. Or," The lightkeeper suddenly adds as he throws open a cupboard's doors and rummages in its depths. "You can use this."

A porcelain bowl, beautifully painted with the characteristic blue chinese patterns, is in his hand. Wariness manifests, of course; this is precious heirloom, and he'd hate for it to be damaged or broken – there are too many memories etched along the spiraling cobalt vines for it to be anything close to disposable. However, somehow, Phoenix – claws and fangs and dribbling blood aside – strikes him as someone who would be mindful of his belongings, as outlandish as it is to have such preconceptions over what is not even human.

And he's trying to exercise trust.

A scoff leaves him at the notion. In no universe does the phrase 'exercise trust' have a meaning remotely similar to what his mind twists it to fit into. *But,* that little voice from yesterday returns to argue, *it is better than nothing.*

The bowl is offered; still, nothing happens. The merman looks at the object, but stays powerless under the immobilization spell. Miles's patience burns out and he sets it directly under the flow of red, wincing lightly at the pool of liquid that gathers far too quickly.

That seems to be the trigger to make comprehension spark within the being, as he rearranges himself on the floor, twisting and coiling his long tail every which way to form a stable foundation capable of supporting him upright; at the end, the ware has a small slot for itself where the appendage bends. Phoenix then looks at him, and smiles a little. Miles takes a couple moments to hunt for energy to look somewhere else.

Judging the unfathomable circumstance safely under control, his stomach reminds him of the hunger that abates him too. It is acceptable to skip lunch once in a while; breakfast, on the other hand, is a sacred meal he has no intention of letting go of. It might be silly, but a day is much brighter when a decent meal introduces it.

He opens a can of canned peaches and retrieves from the freezer one of the packs of pancake batter Gumshoe delivered yesterday, internally chastising himself when he recalls having neglected to ask for a bigger supply – it always ends before the calendar turns a page.

Sizzling fills the room, dough manipulated into discs in an impressive show of skill and obtaining a golden tint progressively stronger under his ministrations. It is almost sufficient to drown Phoenix's relentless munching – the keeper can close his eyes and pretend his life has been reverted to its normal state. That tranquility, however, is shattered in a matter of seconds, because a now audible, distinct dragging noise breaks the atmosphere and the merman spawns by his side; curious, he attempts to peek above the oven, and falls on his back with a surprised shriek when a stray flame nearly licks at his nose.

Miles stifles a laugh, but the snort-adjacent sound that results is still loud enough to alert Phoenix. He turns a disapproving scowl at him; the keeper, having been his whole life

bedeviled by the Von Karma glare, reacts with a barked laugh.

That glower deepens, but a frustrated huff coming from him nullifies any menace the stare could impose – the combination is strikingly similar to what a small animal would do to appear bigger and more dangerous. The problem, he rationalizes, lies in the equation: negative times negative equals positive; in similar fashion, when Phoenix, whose simple existence is already menacing, tries to make himself seem more menacing , the variable anulls itself and the product is an appearance somewhat endearing.

It circles back to the tabby cat of unknown name, how her fur would puff when she hissed in a threat and her aspect would be that of an oversized pom pom, effectively murdering whatever chance there was of reaching the intended result.

A couple more pancakes now an adequate shade, he moves to the table and takes a seat – the creaking of his joints indicate this will be a colder day, and he pens a mental note to fetch another coat later on. A shuffling sound signs that, as predicted, the merman approaches.

He stares at the lightkeeper, features uncomfortably expressionless. Faced with Miles's stillness, he finds himself forced to take the initiative.

“Can I?”

Echoes the sharp noise of Miles’s knife scraping the plate. He removes a glove and picks a slice.

He moves his hand, holding out the piece between thumb and forefinger. A droplet of grease runs down its length and drips in a shiny bead on the floor, eliciting a decades old memory of when he used to sneak meals to Pess, his childhood dog, and she would lick everything – the food, his fingers, the fat that fell on the ground.

He halts.

Violently, he recoils, the loud screech of the chair as it jolts a couple inches backwards startling the merman the same distance away. The strip is placed on the edge of his dish, destined to be discarded.

“Wait.”

Phoenix frowns. It is gone in an instant, though, and he nods his assent, leaning on a leg of the heavy table while the lightkeeper finishes his meal – much faster than is usual. Despite his contempt for letting dirty dishes pile up, the empty plate along the bloodstained bowl are abandoned in the sink; he picks a clean one belonging to the former’s same set and more of the dewy batter. The earlier process is repeated just as fastidiously, albeit forgoing the second and third pancakes; he would like to avoid the waste of precious dough in case the merman is not pleased.

Golden slides around in sync with his motions, movement entrancing, hypnotic. It soon reaches a hue he considers suitable – his consort’s preferences are as much of a mystery as all

that surrounds him – and the fire underneath is extinguished, pancake smoothly sliding from pan to dish.

Prize in hand, he stands in front of the merman.

Phoenix leans forward, waiting. Miles thrusts the dish in his direction with a vehemence that startles him a few inches backwards, but clawed fingers don't hesitate to reach for the ware. The balance he has to create is delicate, Miles notes; those talons have a terrible grip and are too long to allow a proper hold – it wobbles as the merman sniffs and scrutinizes the food. Somehow, he achieves the equilibrium needed, plate stabilized in one palm while a nail from the other plays the role of cutlery.

To Miles's horror, the cut is as clean as the one he produced – only that the keeper had the aid of a sharp, well maintained knife. At least, the knowledge that the thing didn't pose danger despite his vulnerability serves as reassurance; he sends a prayer to the powers above for sending him a creature that, if anything, is docile. The image conjured by his mind, of keen claws slicing at his skin, fade onto the sight of those same talons separating the smaller slice and picking it up. A long gaze examines the golden strip and, at last, he bites.

Chewing sounds partner with the thoughtful expression on Phoenix's face to fuel Miles's anxiety, carving a space in his brain where they can settle while being so meticulously picked apart in the search of any positive or negative sign. The heartbeats as he calmly munches drag, until he swallows; to the keeper's relief, a smile lights his expression.

"Good!" He chirps, ditching any earlier reservations to wolf down what remains in little more than seconds. Triumph surges within the cook, and no effort is made to stop it from spilling over:

"Obviously. It was I who made it, after all."

The merman rolls his eyes, but refrains from rebutting in favor of licking the oil from his fingers and, most annoyingly, the plate. Miles glares at his smug look as that obnoxiously long tongue leaves a trail of slobber on porcelain, before he snatches the plate by an edge how one would hold a dead rat and discards it along the others.

He throws a glance at the clock, cursing lowly at the pointers and the path they've already trailed. Water pours from the faucet and submerges the dishes, to impede remnants of food – and saliva – from forming a crust in the meantime.

After running a lap inside the house to collect the necessary items, he exits the warmer comfort, unsurprised to note Phoenix follows closely behind; the uncomfortable feeling of being hunted has now dispelled, replaced by simple annoyance at having an unwanted follower. Miles props the lighthouse door open and steps inside, backtracked by incessant, sharp clicks that echo in the building's metallic confines – product of claws tapping against steel steps –, not too dissimilar from the noises he creates when drumming his nails on the rails. The duo reaches the highest level, Phoenix coming to a stop at the fringe of the platform.

The merman is visibly tense – it didn't escape the lightkeeper's attention how his dorsal crest rose higher the closer they came near the burner, and he cannot fault him; the noise it makes is as loud and nerve-wracking as what he heard watching a train pass by from the very edge of a railway. Thankfully, Miles's nonchalance when approaching said contraption seems to tranquilize him somewhat, inviting him to crawl closer however suspicious of the mechanism he is. The keeper quickly scans the intricate clockwork for any malfunction and, at an apparent lack, deactivates it.

As the lens' spinning slows, he climbs the small ladder to put off the burner itself, executed by a pull of a switch and the interruption of a pump. He watches the light die out; listens to Phoenix nearing, and spares him a glance to see that crest lowering and curiosity bloom on his face.

"It's the pressurized air and combustion." He deems the burner safely shut down and descends to the floor. "Large volumes of air rapidly passing through a small opening," Phoenix creeps forward, head falling aside in a half-right angle. "and the drops of kerosene they carry being vaporized and then burned. Added to the usual sound of fire."

At the mention of kerosene he stretches his neck and sniffs the air, flinching without preamble. Miles lets out an amused huff. "Not a fan of the smell, I suppose?" He can sympathize, having suffered with the smell for a long time as well. It took him months to become accustomed to the invisible tendrils that waft around, a scent that clung to his nostrils and burned.

Phoenix grimaces and surpasses the keeper when scurrying into the catwalk, desperate to intake a deep lungful of fresh oxygen and seabreeze.

"No."

An airy chuckle leaves Miles as his attention drifts to the scenery. He annotates the necessary information, focus periodically shifting when reverberates the dull sound of Phoenix batting against the wall, in a struggle to fit comfortably within the narrow space. Taking pity on his guest and his ceaseless flailing, he hurries to finish the current task and retreats back inside – to a relieved sigh from a certain tenor.

They exit the lighthouse. Phoenix stops to look at the horizon, gaze vacant, and, as Miles finds when he attempts to follow it, not fixed on anything in particular. There aren't many elements to the picture that could capture his interest so strongly, in any way, as just another grey day looks back; a shame, really, that the habitual monochrome has taken over the tentative peeks of pale blue that tried to trespass at the beginning of the morning. Now, it is more of the same; the gargantuan immensity of the ocean, the sky and its darker splotches, the inconstant seabreeze bringing salt and fish and old, bitter memories of a similar view – only brighter, more vivid, more alive. Remembrance of a sea where Phoenix would be indiscernible from the water surrounding him, that has watched his tiny steps hop over rocks, guided by a firm hand holding his own small one and a smile that reassured Miles he would never fall, not while he had him by his side.

He wonders, whether there is something the merman can see that he's unable to, or if Phoenix is simply as prone to losing himself as he is.

A trill cuts his musings short. Phoenix stares at him; has been doing so, for how much time he doesn't know. It is a bit humorous, that in pondering if the merman loses himself as often as Miles, Miles lost himself.

The trek to the house is silent and uneventful. Phoenix's presence melts into the background, making the instant a perfect recreation of his usual routine: wander to and from as a ghost as he executes his tasks with perfectionist rigor, lacking any perturbations, like a well-oiled machine. A mechanism to perform a role, wound up by a bigger power in the same way he winds up the lighthouse's clockwork.

So why, he asks himself, *why do I feel as if I was misplaced?* Why is he unable to find comfort in the restoration of blessed repetition?

Since a brick in the form of a merman was thrown through the intricate stained glass of his everyday life, he has wished for nothing but some substance that could glue it back together. So why, now, in this fleeting moment where the shards have reconvened in a recognizable image, where – regardless of how fragile – it is whole again, he shies from the projection of that image?

Before he can achieve an answer, it shatters. Said brick crosses it once more, carrying pleas for Miles's focus in the form of high-pitched sneezes, elicited by a colder breeze.

He abandons the broken glass, instead observing the shiver that rolls down Phoenix's body, so strong it makes the tip of his tail lightly tremble – even if he's already halfway into the living room.

Miles halts. An idea crosses his mind, impulsive. And he knows it shouldn't be made a reality, lest he becomes too attached.

Nonetheless, he beckons Phoenix deeper inside the house, inside his bedroom, waiting with a patience that surprises himself for his companion to explore and survey the new territory he was invited into.

"What?" The merman pipes up while he watches Miles pull open the heavy doors of his closet and lean forward to dig inside. The lightkeeper forgoes an answer; it should be plenty clear when it's done.

Miles rummages through the piles of fabric, searching in wooden confines for a generic T-shirt. His memory fails him, and is unable to bring forth any information that can confirm whether or not he possesses an article of clothing that isn't heavy – to protect one from the punishing weather –, or fancy – a remnant of his earlier times he couldn't find it in himself to dispose of. If it comes to that, he doesn't think Phoenix will reject one of his simpler button downs.

"Who?" The sudden question cuts the air. He tilts backwards to assess whatever is the matter, gaze landing on Phoenix, who has crawled until his nightstand and is looking at the photograph he keeps.

Contained by a frame of noble wood that stands proud and upright, slightly yellowed with age but still as crisp as the day it was developed, is the immortalized image of him and his sister on the day of her 9th birthday.

Proudly clutched between her tiny hands, nearly escaping her grasp from the sheer thickness, is a tome on the history of German Law – her gift, as she had completed the edition on American Law a couple weeks prior and was halfway into reading the German constitution; something deemed necessary, seeing as the Von Karmas had moved back to Germany a year earlier. A rare, beaming smile features on her face, the single touch that breaks her otherwise doll-like appearance of porcelain skin wrapped in beautifully uncomfortable layers of delicate cloth, that lets shine through the girl that hides inside – the girl forced to grow much faster than any child should, to switch wooden toys and rag dolls for university level Law books when she could barely even stand, but still emerged if the circumstances were just right. His teenaged hand sits on her left shoulder, a soft gaze on his face she was the sole recipient of. The trees sway in the wind, the flowers glow in splashes of color, the tabby cat is a running smudge in the background.

“That’s Franziska.” He belatedly answers. When Phoenix turns to him, a small furrow between his eyebrows, he adds: “She’s my adoptive sister.”

“Adoptive?” The merman parrots, focusing again on the picture.

“That means she is the daughter of the man that-” The deadpan, mildly irritated look Phoenix throws at him puts a halt to his sentence. “... Yes. Adoptive.”

There’s a momentary lapse of silence, where his guest takes in the photo, down to its last, smallest detail. The same attentive gaze slides to him, a stare that seems to pierce right past his every wall, every barricade he has put on throughout the years to leave him raw and exposed; slitted pupils cut across everything, from the facade he shows to the world till the lies he tells himself. Like he can see all the little things Miles holds so close to his chest they’ve dug deep inside to hide into his heart.

A sudden snort breaks the tension.

“Can see. Much pretty than you.” He gets out through a teasing grin as he slithers closer. The lightkeeper’s thoughts, shocked still by the unexpected laugh, regain movement to run in the opposite direction they were previously following; exasperation engulfs the cryptic thrill he couldn’t name.

“Because you’re a Vogue model yourself.” Miles bites back with a dramatic eye-roll, diving back into the closet.

“Wait cameras find me.” Answers the unintelligible, broken sentence.

“I’m sure that is an *incredible* comeback, *if only* I could understand it.” The lightkeeper replies, choosing to ignore that, by the mention of ‘cameras’, Phoenix makes it known he is somehow acquainted with the magazine.

“No my fault you dumb.”

His body goes rigid. “Excuse me?!” He spits, in disbelief of the utter audacity of this thing. The corners of Phoenix’s wolfish smile curl up, pointing towards eyes home to too much amusement and self-satisfaction for the keeper’s peace of mind.

With a displeased huff, he swallows the retort, intent on not awarding Phoenix at least that specific delight. Rather, he pushes aside thick fur coats and burgundy suits to dig into the sea of fabric, whilst the bane of his existence drops the countenance and wriggles his way under Miles's arm to peer inside. Seconds into the ordeal, a glimpse of a black darker than the shadows around peeks from the depths.

He sticks his hand between stacks of neatly folded clothes and pulls it out with a triumphant flair. The garment unravels, revealing itself to be an official piece of merchandise from the Steel Samurai’s 3rd Broadway play: ‘Steelwork Sabbath’. His memory, usually so clouded and unresponsive, unearths a sudden flurry of recollections he had thought buried and lost beneath tons and more tons of law books and research papers. Nine years ago, clad in a disguise of black that replaced his notorious burgundy and assisted in melding into the throng – just another avid enjoyer –, he was placed in the middle of a tumultuous line snaking out from the Eltinge Theatre, eagerly awaiting along the rest of the crowd for when they could step inside and watch their favorite hero save the day.

How inane, he thinks.

A noise, eerily similar to the muffled snort he left in the kitchen, calls for his focus to be restored. He follows the sound to its source to discover Phoenix directing a shrewd look at him, hand failing to completely cover his mouth so an edge of his wide smile is still visible. Miles tries to rein in the ferocious blush growing in his cheeks, throwing grumbles and the shirt onto the merman with no little strength. “Have some decency.”

Heading for the study, he abandons the creature to his own devices and settles in the plush chair in front of the radiotelegraph. A printed piece of paper sits over the mahogany, its location a sign it was spat by the machine not more than minutes earlier.

A frown grows on his face; it is the first time he has received a reprimand for tardiness.

Somewhere between when he reports on the strength of the waves and the height of the sea, Phoenix sneaks into the edge of his sight, reasonably dressed. Not being provided a shred of attention, he doesn’t try for an interaction with the keeper, rather going to the lower shelves of his study to scan the lined spines.

Can you read? Miles wants to ask – to get to know more. But questions are a powerful thing. It's to construct a bond, as fleeting as it may be; to willfully acknowledge the one being asked has something of value to add to your life, and he has barely come to terms with the fact Phoenix is real yet.

So he doesn't.

A gust of wind outside picks up speed, and he punches the final dot. The chair is loud as it drags, calling for Phoenix to accompany the lightkeeper to the living room, where he grabs

the first newspaper on top of the stack – that rests neatly over the small coffee table – and slumps on the couch to read it in more detail.

A plane from the U.S. Air Force crashed at the Phillipines and left 72 dead, despite the authorities claims of no unusual landing conditions nor distress prior to the occurrence.

Phoenix jumps onto the couch and leans on the opposite arm. His eyes roam the house, deliberately avoiding Miles and not being subtle in doing so.

The town of Bronte had orchards compromised by a new eruption of Mount Etna.

Carefully, in a movement that is simultaneously discreet and tailored to be noticed by the keeper, Phoenix moves a hand to rest between them.

A young Navy boatswain died in a highway accident in Florida.

The merman drags himself closer. The burning on Miles's temple is proof of a blue-brown gaze that refuses to stray.

A beauty salon advertised their services of a permanent wave for three and three-quarters U.S. dollars.

Phoenix lowers himself and lies on his stomach, chin slotted over crossed arms.

"Fine." Miles groans, newspaper hitting his thighs, brought down too forcefully. It stays on the couch as he heads for a short cabinet, dumping the objects on its top onto a shelf to haul it closer, so it sits against the back of the sofa. He drops on the upholstery again and raises an eyebrow at Phoenix, signaling at the furniture now behind him.

Smiling, the merman climbs the backrest with catlike grace to settle over the cupboard, positioned so he is able to peer at the news over Miles's shoulder. A warning glance is thrown at Phoenix, frail hopes this will be the last of interruptions barely standing. The keeper picks the papers and resumes.

'Can your child read?' Is the first thing that meets his eyes in big, bold letters. He blinks, and releases a held breath as soon as he registers the *'summer school classes in reading'* – accompanied by other details, after all, it is an advertisement – lying just below.

He reads through the announcement of a few neighborhood parties, a section on the rights black people are claiming followed by a Reverend spouting the most horrendously misogynistic spiel, that the Democrats are delighted at the amount of scofflaw vote revealed by a recent study, a Mississippi journal that will still publish in spite of being the target of an explosion for unknown reasons, and that in May 11, 1846 the then U.S. president told the Congress a laughably bad lie on the Mexican-American conflict, before a claw enters his field of vision, thrust onto another advertisement.

"What write?" Phoenix asks, and Miles has to squint to decipher the over-elaborate font compressed in such small letters.

"'Coifurre Italienne', if I am not mistaken. That is indeed a terrible choice of font."

The merman makes no further commentary on the topic. "'Hair-setting gel…?" He murmurs instead; Miles feels a spark of surprise when he notices that is the text introducing the advertised product.

At the inquiring eyes that turn to him, the lightkeeper resigns himself to his fate of explaining the most menial things for as long as his companion lingers around.

"It is a substance you apply to your hair so it remains still, undisturbed by wind or other external conditions." He then lifts a hand. "It is honestly surprising you don't use any."

He pushes a few of Phoenix's spikes down, only to watch them bounce back into place the moment his palm ceases obstructing the way. "All natural, baby." Phoenix smiles, mock-seductively. Miles rolls his eyes again, disappointed but somehow not surprised that this was the merman's first unbroken sentence.

"Are you flirting with me?"

The response is immediate and dry. "No." He snorts, clearly finding the mere idea ridiculous. Half the keeper sighs in relief, the other half scoffs in offense.

A column later, what was left of his hopeful fantasies of tranquility wilt. Phoenix snickers, pointing to the story of a couple that sustained a significant 200 US$ in damages in an admittedly funny way: their son rolled the family car backwards into a wall while playing with the gears. Miles can't resist laughing at the unlucky situation, as much as he usually avoids doing so; Phoenix's giggling invites him to laugh along.

Soon, the merman signals another section, asking what meaning a specific word or expression holds, and, as every single question or commentary he poses is well-received by the lightkeeper with a patient clarification or a matching sharp-tongued comment, he doesn't hesitate in highlighting the parts that pique his interest or tickle his humour. Miles keeps on reading as he intended, but now, while he still dedicates his focus to absorbing the information, a part of him eagerly awaits for whatever Phoenix will pipe up with next.

And when he does, they will launch into discussion over the chances Phoenix would have of impeding a boat from capsizing, or on why is it necessary to publicly announce a man will be attending a six-week French course to better his knowledge of the French language, history and culture.

The pendulum clock striking eleven is what awakens them from the lively trance they had enraptured themselves in. Switching locations from the living room to the kitchen, Miles begins the process of cooking a meal for lunch, already meeting a roadblock at the first step: he is unable to assemble the ingredients. His morning was entirely spent engaging in dalliances with his guest, and no thought was paid to what should be cooked later on.

Phoenix, who now feels more comfortable, takes the time to explore. He noses a cupboard open, sticks his head inside, and returns with a package of dry beef held between his teeth.

When his eyes turn to Miles, head tilted aside, the lightkeeper only shrugs.

Stew is what he decides on for the day – with an added extra portion; he will have to remember to bargain with the Navy for bigger provisions so they can safely survive the month. Tasking Phoenix with retrieving any item he might need, cooking is not a problem, although many times he needs to assist when the merman is incapable of reaching a specific place or carrying the object required. He can't be mad, however; not when Phoenix is so apologetic about his shortcomings.

He sets aside a plate, periodically filling it with pieces of whatever he prepares at the moment – alternating between a few carrot roundels, beet cubes, peas and boiled, salted potatoes; the latter turning out to be a favorite of his guest –, which him and Phoenix can enjoy from in the meantime, and works in relative peace. The merman makes a handful of offhanded comments, but doesn't appear all too offended when Miles responds with a hum or a monosyllabic.

He briefly leaves for the storage shack whilst the stew completes the boiling step, fishing for a crate whose presence wouldn't be missed to relocate it to the kitchen, positioning it on the side of the table opposite to where he sits. He serves a bowl for himself and another for the merman, each one set at an end of the furniture, and settles on his chair while gesturing to the box.

Phoenix climbs it and, with some difficulty, twists himself in a manner mimicking the keeper's position. Miles snickers as he fails to utilize a spoon before taking pity on his futile quest; his companion, however, refuses any help, claiming it to be a 'matter of pride'. So, the lightkeeper sits back and entertains himself with the sight for the whole fifteen minutes spent flailing until he realizes he can execute it best with his left hand.

Silence blankets their forms as they eat. A white square of light moves to coat the table; the merman rapidly blinks a few times, pupils constricting into slits to adapt to the new, stronger lighting that bathes their environment.

They finish eating almost simultaneously; Miles moves the dirty dishes to the sink and pulls the wooden crate nearby, leaving Phoenix to figure out how to work the faucet, a sponge and soap while he grabs another, lighter coat in his bedroom and downs it beneath the thicker one. By the time he reenters the kitchen Phoenix has managed the plates, and is in the process of clumsily rubbing the crusts of dried stew off the pan. Rather than intervening, he occupies himself with toweling the dishes dry, putting away those and what ingredients haven't been properly stored yet. Phoenix quickly learns how to improve his efficiency and not half an hour later the room is clean to the lightkeeper's standards.

Somewhere near mid-afternoon, the merman mentions that Miles has very few fish in the fridge despite living on an island; the simple sentence triggers a train of thought that quickly derails with a horrifying realization: he was supposed to tend to the net yesterday, but avoiding Phoenix took up as his foremost priority and his actual responsibilities were shoved to the back of his mind.

He rushes to complete the displeasing work, pained at having to write down the previous date on the report paper. His companion makes a point to snicker at his reluctance to go forth with this small lie, his laughter only increasing in volume as Miles snaps frustratedly at him.

Amid the keeper's incessant complaints and a pool of dying animals, Phoenix extends a clawed finger with what Miles can identify as deliberate slowness, pointing directly at him.

"Cantankerous."

"What?!" Miles pinches the bridge of his nose and shuts his eyes tightly, clutching the last of his manners so angry sputters don't rain over the merman, and wonders if Phoenix is capable of anything beyond insulting the lightkeeper at every opportunity. "Dare I ask how you even *know* that word?"

The offender provides – in lieu of an apology, any further clarification, or even an answer to his question – a victorious smirk, befitting of the one who could strip Miles Edgeworth of his perfectly poised, pristine stance.

Fortunately, sooner rather than later the merman relinquishes his objective of pestering Miles. He lies on the very edge of the cliff, his lying form superimposed over the translucent imagery of himself rolling off from that same spot, the lingering phantom of weeks ago. He watches the horizon yet again, albeit not with a vacant gaze, but an attentive one, that roams over the silhouettes of flying birds and the heterogeneous splotches on the sky, the unrestful sea and the waves breaking in a progressively more violent manner against the shore.

After some heartbeats of scrutinizing the scenery in shared silence, Miles faces him, a tacit question in his mannerisms Phoenix doesn't have trouble discerning.

His reply is confusing:

"Think world very pretty."

"'Pretty'? Everything is grey."

"Grey's pretty."

There is something else to those words, he is sure. A distinct although unrecognizable lilt, so soft the sentence is akin to plumes, opposite to the piercing look Phoenix turns on him. It is an enigma – an attractive one at that, that whispers to his soul, almost begs for him to investigate, to question the reasons for its very existence. Yet, Miles recoils from it, choosing not to dwell; afraid of what he might find hidden under the surface.

He turns around, walking towards his house to seek shelter from the dropping temperatures; stops midway at the lack of noise beyond the breeze and the soil beneath his feet.

"Won't you come?" He doesn't look back. The trawl that sounds is indication enough he has been heard.

"Aww." Phoenix appears by his side, the teasing smile on his lips exhibiting sharp, white teeth. "Miss me already?"

Miles doesn't grace the comment with a response. He lets the howls curling along the cliffside fill the quiet.

As they walk, the winds pick up speed, taking mere seconds to morph from subtle drafts gently ruffling his hair to a shrieking, invisible force that batters him with such power he is forced to stop for a moment and regain his balance, swept away by the gust. After pulling the hood over his head, he removes his right glove, arm extended to the skies. Sound, sight and smell fade into the background as he concentrates on sensing, feeling the hits against his hand to gauge the speeds.

About 30 knots is the guess he settles on, humming to himself. “It seems the furious fifties have returned from their slumber.”

He looks down at his companion. The sight that meets him wrenches a barked laugh from his throat.

Those blue mimicries of ears lean slightly inwards, plastered to his skull. A squinting expression is accompanied by stretched arms that hold himself back, as a fox in the wind. His curated spikes weren’t able to resist the sheer strength of the Fifties, and now point at every direction – Miles can’t help but think of a particularly annoyed compass rose. Phoenix can sense the mocking air exuded by the keeper and retaliates with a glower, wordless as he resumes trudging dejectedly to the house.

Inside, Miles closes all the windows that were open. The merman clambers onto a window sill, trying to help, but relocates to the cupboard with a thwarted sigh when he is unable to balance being upright and pulling it closed. Certain that all escapes that could enable a stronger air current are blocked – the thought alone of having prized possessions thrown to the ground elicits a slight shudder –, he retakes his spot on the couch, now accompanied by his beloved book. Phoenix appears a tad confused, but refrains from questioning, opting to simply settle down and read along.

The lightkeeper is surprised – albeit very thankful – that the interruptions his companion causes are minimal and far between. The space for him to think and absorb the packed content each page holds is appreciated, although he can’t honestly say he despises the grounding, discreet noise of Phoenix’s breathing either. The sun, satisfied, leaves for the day; Miles throws the bookmark at the end of a chapter, which startles a tiny chirp out of the merman, who was nearly dozing off.

This time, however, he is baffled to see Phoenix doesn’t accompany him outside. He goes through the practical motions of routine, skin prickling at the silence that instills even as the flame crackles with violence and the clockwork creaks and whirs alive. To walk alone under the starlit sky brings a perturbing sensation, as if he was the last person on Earth.

When he arrives, Phoenix is curled, taking over the couch. Unsure as to what to do, Miles decides to sleep, even if it would be much earlier than usual – God knows he needs some additional hours of rest, with how dreadfully uncomfortable last night was. Under the impression the merman is asleep, it is a scare to hear his voice suddenly resonate.

“Goodnight.”

“... Night.” He gives in return, not waiting for an addition before retreating to his bedroom.

It is not everyday that he has the luxury to indulge in a bath – ironically, water is a precious resource in this island, not to be wasted –, and in virtue of that they have decreased from a daily source of relaxation to small pieces of paradise scattered biweekly. He wasn't supposed to bathe today, he knows, and a nagging part of his mind conditioned to habit makes it clear it is deeply unhappy with this blatant break of routine; one that was not forced upon him, but that he pondered on and chose himself.

Still, its volume decreases and soon disappears, muffled and engulfed by the warm water he soaks in.

He leaves the bathroom clad in his pink pajamas, a thin cloud of vapor trailing behind him across the short expanse that separates him from the reprieve of thick covers and a soft mattress. Fed by the accumulated exhaustion, sleep is strong enough to easily pull him in its embrace.

It is a welcome interlude that he falls into without complaint, stripped of worries and regrets and everything else that clings to his skin like grime and soot he can't scrub off. So, when he finds himself staring into pitch black, he simply tells his brain he is still asleep, despite the covers that seem to have lost their softness and grate against him as if it were made of sandpaper, despite the indistinct whispers bleeding outside in from between the planks in the ceiling and the chinks in the windows.

Miles tosses and turns, rolling from one side to the other – narrowly avoiding careening into the ground twice – until the blankets are tangled around and twixt his limbs in a trap worse than the cliffside net. He trashes to free himself from the intricate knots they formed and trudges on socked feet to the living room, curled fist rubbing sleep off his eyes.

Taking a wide, round detour around the couch, he flips the switch.

No slumbering merman rests on the sofa. The open door swings, habitual gap leading outside wider. Silvery grass is visible, and a lone streak of moonlight invades the room.

Miles returns to bed.

Rest is slow to come, but somewhere into the early hours he succumbs and drifts again.

He wakes up to the shrill noise of his alarm clock, greeted by the usual sight of a room gleaming in muted tones of grey. Begrudgingly, his body rolls off of its cradle of comfort. Goosebumps erupt along his surface, cold air assaulting every inch of skin revealed as he removes his pajamas. Rapidly, he slips into the bulkier ensemble and waits for it to heat up, picking his glasses from where they sit on the nightstand, in front of the photo, to put them on.

He throws the curtains open and pulls the window a sliver – the necessary to air the room without turning it into a tundra like the rest of the island.

In the living room, he meets Phoenix. Wide awake, lying on the couch he has claimed as his own with hands bracketing his head, avidly devouring a book he must've snatched from some cabinet, attested to by the evident sight of his study when the door should be closed.

Miles isn't sure if he's supposed to be dejected or relieved that the merman has persisted for yet another day – a piece of him still believed him to be a figment of his imagination; an even smaller one refused to let go of the flimsy hope he'd change his mind and leave. The little time he had to ponder on it ticks off; upon noticing his presence, Phoenix's lips stretch in his biggest grin to date.

"Miles!" He says, voice brimming with excitement. That simple sentence is a caress on the human's soul as his spirit, against his will and better judgement, preens in contentment at hearing his given name after what must be decades – in such joyful intonation, moreover. The tip of Phoenix's tail swishes as if an organic metronome, and, with inhibitions lowered by residual sleep, Miles absently wonders if he knows it's timing his heartbeats.

"Good morning. Phoenix." The lightkeeper answers, weary, and tacks the name at the end as an afterthought. The merman looks more lively and content today, much of the sardonicism of yesterday having melted off at some point during the night; the simple fact he greeted him unprompted is a good gauge by itself. Miles steps closer and looks down at the spread pages, but the minuscule letters and the words they're supposed to form don't connect in his mind. "What are you reading?" He asks, fully expecting to be left hanging, query looming in the air but unacknowledged – he still halfway suspects any brusque movement would make him disappear in a puff of smoke.

To his surprise and delight, Phoenix answers.

"'The Mitamorfozis'." He enunciates with such an air of pride Miles can't help but chuckle, and be astounded by it. The gentle laugh rings unnaturally in his ears, crusted with layer upon layer of dust as an old keepsake that was forgotten in the attic, bringing ineffable warmth when rediscovered.

"It's pronounced 'metamorphosis', Phoenix." An instinct pushes out an addendum. "How are you liking it?"

The merman turns the back cover closed and withdraws into a sitting position, so he is on the same level as Miles. "Just finish." He gestures to the book, which the keeper picks up, not aware of how Phoenix carried it and preferring to avoid any potential accidents in case it occurred how he imagines – dear God, he hopes it didn't. "Short," He continues, oblivious to the keeper's internal prayers. "Fun," Such an adjective makes Miles wonder whether Gumshoe bought the correct book. "Pretty good." He finishes, finally answering the inquiry.

Humming, he swipes softly at the cover, staring at the beetle's white, beady eyes. "I have indeed heard very positive things regarding it. Would you mind elaborating?"

Phoenix puts a hand to his chin, mulling over something. Miles gives him his time and thumbs through the pages to give the illustrations a preliminary look, inwardly praising the artist for such magnificent work.

“Kinda routine.” The merman begins. The keeper closes the book. “Like Gregor sees his conditions routine. Weird beginning, not much as should. But accustoms rapid.”

Miles winces at the nonsensical jumble of words. Regardless of how insightful Phoenix’s opinions might be, he should’ve foreseen they wouldn’t be able to discuss them or the book; not with how limited Phoenix’s current speaking skills are. “Phoenix, I appreciate your interest, but I retract my previous question. I cannot understand what you say, and a conversation would be futile.”

He flinches with nary a millisecond passed, not having realized how rude that would ring as beforehand. His right hand twitches, and conscious effort prevents the corresponding leg from bouncing. There is the need to apologize again, but it is stuck in a bloody heap in his throat he has no way of untangling, and only seems to knot tighter under Phoenix’s stare.

Then, the merman shrugs, sliding off the couch with an enigmatic chirp to crawl in the direction of his half-open study.

Miles looks at him in bewilderment as his muscles uncoil at the lack of confrontation. Phoenix, unfazed, snakes past the gap, tail squeezing into the narrow aperture to disappear inside. Reassured however perplexed, Miles fries a quick pancake; fetches a few biscuits, his keys and leaves for the lighthouse.

In a switch of light sources, the crackling flame dies just as the sun finishes climbing out from behind the horizon. In a stroke of bad luck that has a grimace etch itself onto his face and a discontent grunt wrenched from his throat, a problem has spawned in the clockwork, causing the lens to spin in uneven spurts of speed and wobble to one side. After stopping by his study to report on the weather and check on the merman, who skims a lower shelf, undisturbed, he arms himself with almost the entire shed in tools. It doesn’t take long to locate the origin of the problem: a belt is strained, and the extra length provided by the stretch allowed for the sheave to slide downwards, which in turn slightly interfered with the movement of a gear.

The sheave can be pushed back into place without much inconvenience, but, while he is able to provide temporary repair to the belt, it would need a replacement. He does what he is capable of to the best of his abilities, cursing the bothersome timing the impairment chose to manifest in and coughing at the pungent scent of burnt rubber, as he waves the acerbic clouds of smoke away.

Upon his arrival, he greets Phoenix with a quick acknowledgement; his companion’s nose scrunches up, but blessedly, he opts not to mention the foul smell, returning the words instead. The merman is back on the sofa, lying in the same position as earlier, a different book now splayed open; this one much stockier than the previous and covered by black leather. He seems to have read a considerable amount in spite of the small window of time marked by Miles’s absence, if the sizable mound of turned pages is any indication.

“What is this, now?” He is curious, absent from recollection of this particular volume. Perhaps his memory is just failing him; many books were gathered over the years as they were the single thing with an ownership entirely his – disregarding a few trinkets that accompanied him since childhood –, and it wouldn’t be all too strange to forget one or another.

“‘Shudé, the Obscure.” Miles would snicker at the mispronunciation, if Phoenix’s voice didn’t sound oddly choked, soft and plaintive.

“It’s ‘Jude’, Phoenix.” At the lack of response, the lightkeeper looms awkwardly above him, expecting some kind of signal carrying instructions on what should be done next.

An unforeseen turn of events unravels, as the merman brings a curled palm up to wipe at an eye. When he turns to the lightkeeper, his irises are shining with a wet sheen, appearing on the verge of tears and just barely holding back. As no sound leaves Miles, the man too stunned to react, he paws roughly at his face again and pulls himself upright. “Sorry. It stupid.”

Caught off guard, Miles takes a while to comprehend that this strange occurrence bears some sort of connection to the book. He retrieves the volume and gives the selected pages a fast scan, in the search of what garnered this much of an emotional reaction from Phoenix.

It seems to be a break up scene, something about a girl unsatisfied with the protagonist’s actions and the fight that ensues, pigs and an ungodly amount of blood stashed somewhere in the middle. It is far from a happy moment, but nothing altogether too sorrowful to warrant all this grief. Phrases travel to sit on the tip of his tongue; chastisement, a full lecture on why those tears are unnecessary and displaced, rhetorical questions over how he thinks he is going to survive the world when such a trivial thing can bring him to this paltry state. Rotten thoughts that he’s instinctually urged to regurgitate.

But, as he looks over to the merman, fragilized although not weak, overcome with the raw emotion of someone who hasn’t had their heart poisoned and cut by shards of glass, the words die, shrivel and wither away. Miles can’t bring himself to put his feelings under question. He’s distressed, for whatever incomprehensible motive; nothing the keeper can say will change that.

Stiffer than one of the floorboards, he takes a seat next – close – to Phoenix, and muffles a string of swears as what appears to be a spike in his dorsal crest, squished between the merman and the backrest, pokes sharply at his biceps. Miles is unsure as to how to proceed, but, mercifully, he is spared that endeavor when just the aid of contact already makes the restrained trembling lessen.

“Sorry.” Is what’s once again choked out in between sniffles. “I’m being child.”

A deep intake of breath fills his lungs. “It’s ‘childish’, Phoenix. And no, I-” Grey eyes slide from the merman’s features to a spot on the walls, where the wallpaper has begun to peel to reveal the cement hidden behind. “I don’t believe you are being childish. You saw something that made you sad, and are reacting accordingly – even if I think it’s quite overblown.”

Phoenix snivels, and chuckles, pupils hooking onto Miles's with tentative hope. "Really?"

"Yes." He says. His companion perks up, spine straightening with regained confidence. He shuffles closer, tail absently forming a coil around Miles in a mermaid's mimicry of physical closeness, their bodies plastered together. A recounting of the book begins to be woven by him, as detailed as his limited lexicon allows for. The keeper cannot concentrate on it.

His focus shatters and scatters in a swarm of butterflies. Realistically, Phoenix's temperature is lukewarm; hot for a fish, but colder than a human should ever be. And yet, every square millimeter of the merman in contact with him feels searing hot, as if he laid on cemented ground on a sunny summer day.

When was the last time someone touched him? Or, to be more accurate, when was the last time that he accepted someone's touch? That he didn't shy away from affection?

The abrupt sensation of having warmth wrap him all around, a warmth derived from another person, a person showing him a sweltering degree of fondness, is nauseating. He wants to run, but is unable to. He is rooted to this spot on the couch, his skin tight as if it was trying to flee by itself while his body leans further in.

Phoenix keeps talking regardless of the lack of input, his monologue barely more than white noise serving as fuel for the cotton fuzziness inside his brain. The merman's excitement grows as he gesticulates and motions to the specific sections of the text, rambling about the protagonist's various dreams and quests. Miles distantly feels guilt, for nor moving to engage in his interest, leaving him to waste well-planned thoughts and the effort of organizing his words on an equivalent to a brick wall. However, even that isn't sufficient to evoke the will to act.

Slowly, in small bits, the fuzzy feeling recedes, allowing space for awareness to come back to him. First, he registers the omnipresent smell of salt, underlined with hints of pancake from the dirty dishes waiting in the kitchen. Then, the lingering flavor of the biscuits he ate after the quick breakfast. The wool encasing him. Silence.

Lastly, Phoenix's shining irises, a concerned slant to his eyebrows and a slight frown on his face.

"Miles?"

Grey eyes are wide. He can feel tears beginning to gather, sharp stings as he refuses to blink.

His mind runs a thousand kilometers a minute, unwinding the last couple days like yarn, like pulling apart at the edges of fraying tapestry.

Miles's life has been following the branches of a fractal, walking over their trails inwards and inwards and inwards into the same path, with no way of escape but to throw himself over the edge and dive into a blank space where he fears going insane, incapable of distinguishing between what is real and what is imaginary. It is a delicate balance that keeps itself strong, but breaks so easily at the smallest external intervention, a scale that can be overturned by a mere grain of dust.

The winds brought him that speck of sand.

Phoenix appeared. An unpredicted variable, a mismatched number, a point out of order. Now, the figure is broken, and it is out of this realm of possibilities to fix it.

An absurd thought springs forth. An absurd thought whispering that, maybe, there's the slightest possibility that a very small part of him doesn't even want to.

"Miles." The merman repeats, tone sterner. The lightkeeper blinks, owlishly, before turning lax.

"My apologies, it seems that I spaced out. Please, continue."

It is not in any way convincing, and Phoenix's wary look betrays that he thinks the same. However, he doesn't pursue, and picks up where he left the retelling at. This time, the lightkeeper pays attention, only momentarily distracted when one of the many spikes in Phoenix's person pokes him at an angle.

Phoenix is spiky. All acute angles, straight lines and pointed, perforating edges. Still, as Miles finds while watching the merman sympathize so strongly with a character he has known for so little, he's warmer, more approachable, gentler and kinder than he could ever dream to be. He can melt himself and pour the liquid into a new mold how many times he desires, but it isn't his shape, his angles, his sharpness of roundness. It is his material – what he's made of – that is poisonous, that irradiates an atmosphere of unrest and unease. It hasn't always been like this; it was circumstance that infused him with venom, made it an inseparable part of him. But there is no way of separating the innocent 'him' that wasn't mistreated by the world and the poison he was made to eat and grow from.

Regardless, for some indecipherable reason, Phoenix has chosen to stay.

Even with the myriad of bluer seas and milder climates out there, pieces of land where the grass is green and the sun burns pleasantly at the skin, places where coral reefs are an explosion of underwater art and an abundance of life inhabits it, he opted for Miles's greyed, cold reality. To be the single colorful spot in this monochrome world.

Miles contends himself to the fact that Phoenix, in spite of everything, isn't going away any time soon.

Chapter End Notes

everything newspaper related in this chapter was taken from the Lewiston Evening Journal - May 11, 1964. you can access it here :)

for the books, "Jude, the Obscure" actually is an edition i myself own (it's a relic i found, from 1947 if you can believe it) and, even though mine is an edition in portuguese, we're pretending it's in english so we can stick it in. "The Metamorphosis" isn't any real

edition; i wanted it to be, but unfortunately i am way too lazy to search for an ilustrated edition with a cool cover that existed at that time.

Crumbling stones rolling down

Chapter Notes

> I should probably also add that Miles is, at times, kind of an unreliable narrator - majorly when it pertains to an assumption he makes about Phoenix's past. If you have any idea of canon and Phoenix's character you'll be able to identify these bits with ease and they'll be rectified in chapters to come, but I thought I should highlight it anyway.
>
> This is also going to be kinda gruesome and heavier, so please, if you are more sensitive and don't mind slight spoilers when it comes to that check the TWs at the end notes.
>
> And lastly, no, don't worry, the chapters won't keep getting longer (they're not supposed to, at least).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next day, Phoenix is fixated on yet another book as Miles ticks the daily box.

The next, he waits in silence, staring at him until the keeper realizes he is expecting an invite for shared breakfast.

The next, the living room is empty, and the merman is quite literally caught with his hand in the cookie jar, stealing a few biscuits from an ornate pot in the kitchen. He scurries into the shadowy corners like a cockroach as Miles sleepily scolds him for not even having the decency of being discreet about it.

The next, Phoenix politely asks if he can, please, have some biscuits, reddening when Miles recognizes the specific sentence from a book and points it out with a chuckle. Within, however, he is comforted, seeing the lengths his companion went to with the sole purpose of following his guidelines.

The next, Phoenix asks again, although his phrasing is rougher and less polite. Miles gives him permission anyway, but not without an accompanying remark on the decline of his decorum; the merman answers with a matching comment on the lightkeeper’s own politeness, munching smugly on one of his hard-earned treats.

Day after day, he wakes up to find Phoenix there. In his kitchen, in his living room, in his study; one time he even catches a glimpse of indigo blue peeking through a tiny gap in his bedroom door, that vanishes so quickly he is left wondering if it was a trick of his imagination.

Many pages on the calendar are turned; thirty times more boxes ticked. Phoenix, laughing, teasing, complaining, bickering, or standing silently in wait, watches it all from close by.

The expectation that he would disappear the more Miles's walls were broken down, that, horrified and disgusted by what hid behind – or maybe tired of the keeper's blankness where the components of a person should be –, he would retreat into the sea never to be seen again, couldn't thrive for long when each day that counted with the merman's presence piled up to render it more and more unrealistic. The evidence is that Phoenix either can't see the horrible mess Miles is beneath so many layers, or he just doesn't mind it.

Some days, the lightkeeper would look down and forth and up, and wish for such an event. The weight of Phoenix's gaze, gentleness, kind or playful words, would be too much to bear, and he would long for the silent and comforting monochrome, bare of any laughter or shimmering blue; for no distraction to the numbness in his shoulders and the ache in his back – the crushing pressure of the bodies he has to carry. Those days, he would embody one of the many rocks lining the cliffside shore: unyielding, cold and sharp, and try to extinguish the flame that, unbeknownst to him, was what kept his body warm.

In one such occasion, Miles, having relapsed and fallen into old, predatory habits, was hounding him in the search for weaknesses and vulnerabilities. *"Are there any others of your kind?"* He had asked, sulking, his face buried so deeply in a newspaper, glued to an advertisement for house paint on sale, that the merman had long given up on digging it out.

Phoenix's eyes slid, from the book splayed over the couch to Miles's face. He may never be rude or snippy, but he isn't an imbecile; Miles knows he can see when the lightkeeper retreats into the bottom of the well – no matter how discreetly he does so – with an impressive and discomforting ease, like it was as clear a fact as the sky being grey. Usually, he would try to coax Miles out, throw ropes, ladders and then himself into the pit with the sole objective of fishing him from the depths. At times, he would succeed; in the overwhelming majority that remained, the keeper would remain curled in his castigation, roots even Phoenix couldn't sever keeping him firmly in place.

Needless to say, the latter plagued the moment. The merman was not happy about it – he never is, but he has learned it is best not to stretch his boundaries too much, lest they snap.

"Not I know of." Phoenix answered regardless, casually honest.

It had been akin to slapping Miles across the face, leaving his cheek marred by deep gashes and the stinging that accompanies. He had found the vulnerability looking for, but as shame coursed through his body and a sharp pang of guilt impaled his heart, he realized he couldn't allow himself to take advantage of it.

Alone, he is, and the person he is alone with doesn't put limits on their cruelty.

"Oh." Come on, his mind had said, *you owe him this, at the very least,* and the reminder was enough to make him force something out. *"I am... Sorry to hear."*

Phoenix's eyebrows knitted together. *"Why?"*

An identical furrow formed between Miles's own. Before he could ask, the question on Phoenix's face vanished, replaced by a widening of his eyes in some realization.

“Wait, no, you got wrong! Don't know anyone like me; I never have.”

“... Never?”

“Mhm.”

He needed a couple moments to register the response, and then a few more to fully comprehend it; when he did, he wasn’t sure whether that was better or worse than his initial assumption.

Phoenix was spared from the grueling, torturing, endless pain only the loss of a loved one could sow – which would be good, would be just another thing for Miles to envy about him, if that wasn’t because said loved one never existed in the first place. And that is possibly an even grimmer reality.

“So you are… alone?”

Phoenix tilted his head, humming. *“In a way.”*

For some time, he used to believe he should’ve been an orphan, that the sore feeling of being by himself would’ve been lessened had it always been that way. But years of agony with memories of his childhood, his father, as the single tether anchoring him to the world, eventually made him realize he wouldn’t trade those experiences – the tears brought on by a scraped knee, the laughs at silly jokes, the soft, sleepy fuzziness of bedtime stories, and so, so much more – for anything in this plane. They were precious, more so than ingots of gold or polished diamond; out of everything, his most prized possessions, inextricable from himself.

That Phoenix, so good of a person, has none of it, is unthinkable.

He spent the rest of the day retracted into himself, curled into within the bounds of a small, invisible ball. Regret festered in his innards, eating away until there were aching holes in their trails. Atonement was possible; the merman made it obvious with everything but words that it would be there if he ever needed to reach for it – but he didn’t know how to tread the path leading there, and was afraid any minor stumble would throw him rolling downhill and make Phoenix hate him all the more.

It was then, slumped on his rickety couch at least 100 kilometers away from the nearest human but so close to the nearest kind soul, nose tucked into the images of rising balloons, that he arrived at an important – if not terrifying – realization: in those days, he would want space; Phoenix’s absence, not Phoenix’s hatred.

In close pursuit, came acceptance. Knowing that, even at his worst, he didn’t wish for his companion to despise him, unleashed a thought kept trapped, tightly bound by chains deep inside his subconscious: that he genuinely enjoyed his company, and wanted the feeling to be mutual. For Phoenix to be fond of him in return.

He longed for that companionship, the unimaginable and unparalleled warmth a lukewarm being gifted him with, subtly but persistently, so that the ice around him had melted without

him even realizing. So much so that small pieces of himself he held buried in his heart are routinely traded, in a way that's not any subtle but so natural he fails to notice.

When Phoenix curiously inquired about the dog collar he keeps, he didn't think twice before wading through painful childhood memories to fish out the manuscript he had on the topic; ramble day and night, on and on, about Pess.

The first note Phoenix left for him, containing an unintelligible script but an impressive rendition of Miles on his armchair as he enjoys a newspaper, went into the upper drawer of his nightstand. He stood, uncertain and certainly uneasy, but couldn't bring himself to dispose of it. The second was part of a poem, the third a quote from a book, the fourth accompanied a colorful seashell, and the fifth was given directly to him by a bashful merman. All of them rest safe in his nightstand, where he can feel their presence beside him when he lies to sleep.

Pancakes awaited him one morning, when he woke up a bit earlier than usual to a racket echoing from the kitchen. When he arrived, he found Phoenix had managed to push the chair and his box in front of the counter and oven. Despite his movements being difficult and clumsy, he had cooked with reasonable success – the keeper's surprise was amplified tenfold when Miles realized he didn't have a recipe book nor had commented on the process, and Phoenix learned the proper method by observation alone.

When he stood, stunned, while Phoenix, as he had never done before, cried. Not the subtle watering in his eyes that was the manifestation of some character's woes, but agonizing sobbing, letting escape in large tears and rapid breaths such sorrow that it ripped apart the blithe image of the merman he had built. Miles hadn't had the courage to ask him why, to try to comfort him in any meaningful way, but he sat on the couch and let Phoenix curl against his side and weep until the last star running down his cheeks died.

His T-shirts, grey and black and blue, resting in the same closet but, one by one, switching owners.

Like the stubborn little stone Miles cannot remove from a ridge in the sole of his shoe, the merman sought any crack in the keeper's life he could find, regardless of how small it was; and, after a show of contortionism and some dislocated bones, lodged himself into it.

That space grew, its walls worn off by Phoenix, intentionally or not. Its expansion was enormous, so big he only notices its sheer size when the merman is absent, and, removed of his big personality and blinding smiles, all that is left is a pitch black hole that threatens the structural integrity of everything around if left unfilled. So, when he is tossed into the well and forced to wallow in his flaws, by the eventual nightmare or simple pettiness of some god, he makes an effort to show Phoenix the civilization he rarely bestowed upon others. He holds back by a short leash any rude retort or snappish comment, allowing for poignant silence to flourish – and, if it grows to become so stifling it is impossible to endure, he looks at the merman with softness, with the unspoken anguish that already provides Phoenix all the answers he needs before he could even ask, and politely says: *I need a little space, could you leave me alone for some time, maybe return in a couple hours.*

Phoenix will direct him a gaze weighed by concern; if met with reaffirmation, he makes himself scarce as requested, disappearing so completely it's as if he slipped out of existence.

Miles will have ample time to stew in his misery, and reassure himself that he still exists when the merman isn't in the vicinity, that Phoenix is an important part of his life rather than the whole of it and his tangibility isn't rescinded if a clawed hand doesn't hold him closely.

He will walk down to the docks, among the calls and murmurs exchanged by birds and seals and all manner of life, and sit at the far end, his legs dangling in the air. He will breathe deeply and watch the albatrosses soaring in black and white brush strokes across the sky, the brownish grey conglomerates of elephant seals lazing in the shore, close his eyes and appreciate the eventual faraway whalesong if Lady Lucky takes pity on him.

Some days, the grey sea is placid, a perfect mirror, a surface so flat Miles has the impression plunging his fingers into it wouldn't create the smallest of ripples, and he is almost tempted to jump from his perch and walk the endless grey floor until his old home. Some days, the grey sea is violent, the sprays created by aggressive waves soaking the hems of his trousers, a beast that devours anything with hubris enough to dare try and toy with it no matter how big or powerful it is or once was.

But, some days, the grey sea would wobble like childhood jello, weak waves protruding from the unsteady plane to soon meld back into it, or crash on the shore with just the right balance of violence and gentleness to wrest out his sins while leaving his body untouched, so he can watch, a sense of peace settling over him, as his wrongdoings disappear amid white foam to be buried in the gargantuan immensity, out of sight for as long as it takes for the sea to choke on the bitterness and spit them back.

A certain merman would join sometimes, to play with the animals swimming beneath, make him company while they observe the horizon, or curl, pressed against his thigh, and fall asleep.

Once, during the worst month of the year when he could barely find the will to do so much as leave his bed, he was sat on his habitual perch, his leg moving slightly along Phoenix's slow, rhythmic breaths, secure in his wooden post while the world wobbled beneath him and the tip of a blue tail dangled in the winds in tandem with his feet. From the distance, origins lost somewhere in the grey, in a volume that caught the attention of every seagull that was picking at their wings, every penguin tottering on the shore, every seal rolling on the rocks, resounded Lady Luck's gift.

Whalesong, low, strong, and so beautiful, traveled the four directions to reach him and anything else that would listen.

As everything good and gorgeous in his life, however, its duration was awfully short. In a few seconds, the world had descended into silence once more, and his mind bid goodbye to the mysterious individual that graced him with this momentary taste of paradise.

Until, it began again.

It was not the same. Now, it was weaker; still sufficiently strong to startle nearby wildlife and himself, but not to project kilometers upon kilometers away – useless for finding others and establishing any communication. It was gravelly, and more constant, lacking the long and

uneven breaks so characteristic of whales. It didn't die a quick death, persisting with the same intensity for each passing second. And, it came from… near.

From Phoenix. Phoenix, whose eyes kept closed, whose breathing kept steady, whose consciousness kept firmly ensnared in the comfortable embrace of restful sleep. Phoenix, whose throat visibly worked, as the small gills on the sides of his neck opened and closed in synchrony with the sounds, and his neck inflated and deflated near imperceptibly. The keeper had never noticed it, the faint striated pattern running down his throat, or the thinner and more elastic appearance of that skin.

He was quiet, stunned. Phoenix's melody echoed, not loud enough to reach other isles, or maybe even as near as the lookout post on the other side of this island – but, for Miles, it drowned everything beyond.

Gingerly, as if he had been teleported back to that first day here at the docks, he put his hand to the merman's raven locks. He didn't move; just kept his palm there, touching, and tried to stop his heart from tearing through its cage when Phoenix leaned into it as the song intensified.

There was a sadness, a deep rooted melancholy planted in the moment. He followed one of its branches to arrive at a realization hung at the very tip, like fruit red and ripe for the taking, and wrenched out the thought to more closely analyse it.

It said, simply, that this surprise was the result of his own ignorance. How he forgets about Phoenix's inhumanity, as keen claws melt into short nails, canines are no more sharp than his own, slitted pupils are a trick of light and scales and fins are nothing more than the new normal. Then, Phoenix does something, anything, that veers into unpredictability and he is reminded: Phoenix isn't human. No matter how intelligent, he is just another animal; with his own biology, his own instincts, his own way of living – like how cats and dogs and humans themselves are. So similar to him, yet different in a fundamental way, defying the expectations Miles places upon him only because he resembles something that he is not.

He is Phoenix. Not human, not any other known animal, and the lightkeeper even risks saying not quite a merman either. Just Phoenix, insofar as his care and interest are concerned.

Miles tries not to forget anymore. He maps Phoenix's body, trying to learn and, more importantly, trying to understand.

He feels smooth, hard scale under his hands, as he runs them up and down Phoenix's tail when the merman succumbs to the call of sleep while the lightkeeper still stands, and then watches as, by daytime, Phoenix absently picks at them, talons reaching underneath and between to pull out scraps or fully formed scales out. *'Why?'* he had asked – but, as it is with any and all instinct that comes from the primal corners of the brain, Phoenix couldn't provide a response more substantial than a shrug of the shoulders accompanied by an unhelpful *'it feels right'*.

Miles, of course, wouldn't be stopped so soon – he had been an investigator, once.

He buys book after book after book on animal behavior, spends afternoon after afternoon after afternoon poring over them in the journey to find a suitable answer, and arrives at a reason that is satisfactory, albeit surprisingly simple: grooming. And, following intense observation of Phoenix's supposed preening habits that ends with him being gifted an iridescent blue scale and a few embarrassed glares, he can confidently affirm his hypothesis was correct: Phoenix preens to either remove damaged scales and parts of stuck membrane, or to straighten and smooth the ones that are crooked but not at a dire enough state to warrant removal.

And that was far from the end. He was determined to know everything there was to know, no matter how small or subtle a detail.

For example, his body as a whole. It is slightly… stretched. Longer than a human's should be, although not by much – just enough to be uncanny. When he breathes, his chest expands an uncomfortable amount, and the exhale escapes through his gills, not through his nostrils. His skin appears normal only until contact is made, upon which it reveals itself to be slippery in an eel-like manner, soft and inhumanly resistant.

His teeth are confusing; they don't resemble any animal in particular while being a combination of various different species'. Firstly, he has two more than the average human adult; an expected adaptation, as he is capable of opening his mouth much wider. These two extra teeth are incisors crammed in his upper jaw, a bit longer and sharper than the others; this also makes his upper canines – long and rounded – one position behind where they would sit on a human jaw, in such a manner that his lower canines slot on the front, conferring his smile a more canine appearance.

He remembers Phoenix squirming slightly as the lightkeeper stared intensely, pulling at the thumb hooked in his cheek like a fishhook. Miles's other hand caressed his jaw, trying to soothe the merman while he peeked inside to examine the back.

The first set of premolars are menacing carnassials, trifurcated and sharp. The second set of premolars, on the contrary, are similar to a lion's; wider at the base and bifurcated. The first pair of molars is duller, and engraved with strange holes that create a look of twisted, hook-like protrusions. The second set of molars are wide, much more resembling of a human's but somehow not quite; in the very end, a lone set of what appear to be cow-like molars are located.

"Why is that even necessary?" He had asked, pulling away and letting Phoenix free. *"What could you possibly eat to warrant all that?"*

The merman worked his jaw a few times, sore from holding it open for so long. *"Pretty much anything that comes my way."*

"'Anything' what?"

"Anything edible. Fish, crab, kelp, krill, seals and penguins when I'm especially hungry, flight birds if I want to have some fun, sometimes even snails. Whale carcasses are a personal favorite; fish can't eat the upper part since they can't- well, get out of water- and there are

few birds that prey on carcasses around, so the bellies, despite bloated, are usually almost intact-"

"Stop." Miles bit out, a fist in front of his mouth as his stomach churned and bile rose in his throat. It is almost surreal to think of Phoenix, his Phoenix, so caring and sweet if not a tad infuriating, gnawing at meat wherein the soul still squirms, or feasting on a banquet that decays as he eats. *"Just- stop. Please."*

"You asked." Phoenix retorted.

"And I now firmly regret doing so."

He discovers Phoenix has fin spines in the frontal extremity of every fin, which explains the seemingly unnecessary care the merman takes every time he would settle near Miles. That his pelvic fin has a thin stripe of bright yellow on its front. That he never chirps at random, but trills come at will; he is able to produce clicks, but rarely does so; he can growl, and it is a deep, menacing sound that invokes the fight or flight response of anything that breathes.

The lightkeeper held high hopes he would never have to hear it outside of demonstrations with the express purpose of quelling his curiosity – but they are crushed sooner than he would have expected, one day when Miles rouses by the early morning as is usual, blissfully oblivious to the disaster to come.

When he reaches the living room to see no merman waiting, wariness spikes, sharp through the haze of sleep. Phoenix leaves not long after he has fallen asleep and returns not long before he wakes up, a routine cemented and unfailing he sees no reason to falter now. Suspicious, he opens the swinging door further, and all his senses heighten as distant screeching echoes from the pier downhill.

At 400 feet away, Miles cannot discern what is happening with clarity, but the blue shimmer of Phoenix's tail squirming around an unfamiliar bluish blob coupled with the distressed shrieking is more than sufficient to put him on alert. He stands frozen for half a second, the outside chill worming into his bones, before ungluing himself from the doorframe and wrenching his shotgun from where it has rested, undisturbed, since the middle of last year when the Soviets sold a shipment to the Chilean government and a leftover one was handed to him.

He sprints down the slope, small pebbles raining after him, his heartbeat in his ears. The closer he is, the clearer the picture becomes; Phoenix writhes on the rocky seashore, caught in a brawl with a hulking leopard seal, a distinct rusty red matting the grey shirt Miles gifted him and, most worryingly, smeared on his body. The merman bites, scratches and claws at the animal, but an untimely swipe at its neck exposes himself and grants him a firm bite on the trapezius. He screeches, loud, pained; Miles stops, aims, and takes his shot.

The first round of pellets bury in its side. It wails and, still holding Phoenix in its mouth like prey to safeguard, tries to make a turn and flee. Phoenix, however, notices Miles stalking closer while reloading, aim still pinned to the animal, and ceases his attempts at freedom to immobilize the animal instead.

It works; the second shot strikes it in the neck, dangerously close to Phoenix but diverted slightly to the side by what must be the hand of God. This time, the merman can't stop the animal from recoiling and retreating to the shore, and the keeper is forced to watch his friend's limp body be carried by the shoulder. Miles curses, fumbling with the last cartridge, each beat he spends failing to reload a couple more feet Phoenix is hauled away; when he manages to finally load it on, he is near the seal, and the third shot, striking the back of its head from so close by, affords it an instant death.

As its corpse falls slack, Phoenix pries himself free from its jaws, curling into a bloodied heap on the rocks as Miles throws the gun to the ground and runs to his side. There is a pool of red gathering underneath him, growing in size even though the dead leopard seal is a good couple meters away, and he feels the panic clawing at his chest sharpen until he can barely hold the ribbons of his heart in. The red – it's too vivid, too colorful for his world; it's entering, uninvited and unwelcome, into his realm of grey and blue speckled by browns and faint golds. He wants it *out.*

Only the first two letters of 'Phoenix' leave his lips before the merman recoils with a loud, rumbling snarl, wild eyes surveying the surroundings in the recognizable mania of cornered prey.

Miles backtracks a few steps, enough for the growl to be reduced to a trembling hiss. One deep breath to keep the panic at bay, and he slowly approaches, exaggerating every movement to avoid being perceived as a threat, crouching once he is near Phoenix.

"Hello, Phoenix." He speaks, soft, so soft the silent breeze almost sweeps it away. "It's just me, Miles." He extends a hand, hovering close to the merman's bloodstained cheek, a pang of hurt piercing his heart as Phoenix keeps his teeth bared. "You don't need to be afraid."

Phoenix wheezes. The loose T-shirt still hangs on, and Miles can't be certain of the full extent of the injuries he must've sustained, but the fabric is torn in a few concerning places – he needs urgent medical attention.

"Let's get you home and take a look at those wounds, shall we?"

The sneer on bluish lips diminishes, a glint of recognition shining in his mismatched irises. Fangs are tucked away and his head falls on Miles's palm with a pitiful whimper.

Meanwhile, the keeper's mind runs in the search for a feasible way to take Phoenix home, that is neither time consuming nor puts him in danger. The merman is incapable of dragging himself uphill, and, while Miles can hold him for a considerable time, he knows he won't be able to carry him all the way up in a timely manner – he loathes the risk, moreover, of dropping Phoenix midway and having his wounds aggravated.

In a second he has made his decision. He takes off running, sure to pick up his gun; by the time he reaches the small shack he is red in exertion, huffing as he tosses the shotgun at a random spot – uncaring as to the clatter of multiple objects that tumble at impact –, and pulls the roller cart from its corner. A string of swears fills the cabin; the fallen items block his way out. He carelessly kicks them aside and bolts downhill, considering, for a split second, that maybe it would be a good idea to jump on it and use it as a soapbox cart to save some

precious seconds, but quickly ditches the notion; if it were to go out of control and he ended up hurt, he wouldn't be any useful.

As he approaches at a speed too fast for the unsteady grounds but too slow for his urgency, he scans the scenery, looking for signs if the situation has worsened during his absence. Phoenix's state hasn't gotten better, but at least he now seems to have stabilized. The red pool underneath him still grows, though not as rapidly, and his breathing – still unnervingly loud – sounds rhythmic and deep. He lays prostrate, his head tucked between crossed arms, abdomen slightly raised to give way for what appears to be the thickest current of blood to flow freely.

Miles calls his name. Phoenix's head snaps up, a preliminary sneer on his lips, before the surprise wears off and he relaxes, allowing Miles to maneuver his pliant body onto the cart.

"Hold here." The keeper says, a wrist of Phoenix's trapped in his hand, while he positions the merman's palm over a steel bar on the front extremity of the car. His words aren't verbally acknowledged, but the merman's fingers close around the metal until dark blue talons have dug a slot for themselves. Miles chastises himself for not retrieving ropes, a sheet, something that could hold Phoenix more securely through the steep hill – now, unfortunately, it is already too late.

His neck hurts from the constant whiplash of looking back to check on Phoenix and looking forth at the path; he doesn't pay it any mind. Rather, he curses the hill for being too steep, he curses himself for being too slow, he curses the wind for being too strong, he curses the door for being too narrow, and, as Phoenix flinches at a sudden creak, he curses the floorboards for being too loud.

Inside his bedroom, he strips the mattress of everything on it and throws the heap of blankets aside. A slight shudder is elicited by the hospital-like appearance of his bed with naked sheets, exacerbated by the metallic stench that wafts in the room.

In a stark contrast to his frantic behavior until now, he gingerly takes Phoenix in his arms, careful not to jostle him too much, and lays him on the bed with the same delicacy. He grabs a pair of shears from his dresser and tears through the Evil Magistrate's face, tossing the ruined shirt to the floor.

The merman opens his eyes. Blue and brown are dull, and stare at the middle distance for too long before focusing on his consternated face.

Miles rushes to his bathroom and cleans it of anything that might be useful, leaving behind a sight similar to what a weak tornado would cause. He doesn't have time to warm the water, and soothes himself with the knowledge Phoenix is used to these seas anyway, plunging a rag into the basin of near ice. A small whine escapes the merman when he presses the cloth to the back of his neck, blaring like an alarm that sends Miles into paralysis until he notices Phoenix welcomes the touch.

The fabric doesn't take long to turn a nasty shade of red, but the trail in its wake is clear. Miles winces when Phoenix winces, as it swipes over the circular punctures left on his trapezius – thankfully, the bleeding on that is subsiding already.

There is another on his left bicep, with an identical appearance, and a shallow cut on his left pectoral where teeth must have grazed. What stops him in his tracks, however, with the resurrection of dying desperation, is the injury sitting in his right midsection, hidden beneath a thicker blanket of blood. Phoenix's two lowermost gills are torn, having been ensnared in the path of an arc composed by small, comma-like injuries where the seal bit and tugged.

The thin, slightly purplish filaments that should be obscured by a flap of skin are severely damaged or missing. The gill arches have been nearly shredded, sustaining ugly rips regardless of being of harder structure. The skin that guards them has been lacerated. Blood bubbles out of it, and Phoenix's wheezing restarts.

Abruptly, the keeper understands why Phoenix was lying on his front.

Water pours out of his window; he turns Phoenix on his stomach and slides the now empty basin beneath the wound. The merman sags onto the support as a thin line of red trails from a corner of his lips; Miles wipes it with his thumb and scoots closer with a spray bottle of phenol in one hand and the stained rag in the other.

He first cleans the wound on his trapezius, swiping the blood away and spraying it with the antiseptic, making quick work of cutting gauze and adhesive tape and applying both over the area. He soothes Phoenix with quiet 'sh's and 'I'm sorry's when he whimpers at a rougher swipe or shivers at the ghost of Miles's touch, while the keeper repeats the process for every other injury but his gill.

Phoenix's eyes open. They are a little more vivid, but still nauseatingly pained. Miles moves sideways, so he is able to face him as the merman lifts his head to look at him.

"I'm sorry." Miles says.

Phoenix coughs. Red dots are stark in the sheets for a second before merging into the background of rust. "What for?" He asks, voice hoarse, wet.

"For almost letting you choke on your own blood."

A loud laugh echoes from deep in the merman's mutilated chest. Miles startles; the sound interrupts the spiral of self-admonishment he was readying himself to embark into.

"Come on, Edgeworth. Am not a damsel in distress. I could simple turn around myself if it get bad."

"You were wheezing." *Lacking air. His hands are too small, cold metal between them.* "I'd consider that 'bad'."

"You were taking care of me. Didn't want to interrupt." Phoenix smiles. Tired, but genuine. "Besides, I knew you'd realize it."

Miles freezes, for a second, an hour, a year.

'I knew.' How? There was no way of knowing how Miles would act beforehand. Phoenix might be a mythical being, but his claws, no matter how sharp, cannot puncture and reach

within time. It is one of the few certainties he has regarding Phoenix, this awareness that the merman is not a magical being – that he is not able to manipulate reality, the elements or anything else –, but a simple creature of flesh and bones, restrained by his own biology, like Miles himself is.

How, then? How could he be so sure? Is the lightkeeper really so predictable? Is this a pattern he laid out without noticing?

Or does Phoenix just trust him this much?

He doesn't ask. "Shut up." He snaps, instead, gaze veering aside in embarrassment. "You couldn't have known."

"Why, Mr. Observation Skills. I thought you like to brag about your investigative powers."

"The word you're looking for is 'prowess', Phoenix. And I do not."

The teasing smile turns sharp, stretching to show off his canines. "Are you telling me to assume you're dumb?"

"No."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Your Highness. I meant to ask if you're telling me to assume you're *unobservant."*

Miles throws him a glower Phoenix unfortunately has obtained immunity against. "You are playing far too much for someone who is bleeding out and at my mercy."

"You wouldn't *dream* of doing something to me. I know there is a soft heart somewhere underneath all those barbed words and adorable glares."

That is more than Miles's patience was willing to take, and with it burning as short as the kerosene in the lighthouse he scoffs and stalks out of the room. If Phoenix can engage in this inane bickering then he is certainly well enough to hold out on his own for some minutes while Miles tends to his responsibilities. The light still shines brightly, and, unless he wants to risk running out of fuel, it is imperative that he turn it off as closely to schedule as possible. The thought of yet another tardiness warning sitting on the mahogany near the radiotelegraph brings a grimace to his face.

He climbs the stairs until the lightbulb, and the echo of his footsteps weighs on him

The facade of irritation at Phoenix's harmless teasing breaks down quickly. The sound of the pressurized air dying out reminds him of Phoenix's breathless wheezing, and his mind is flooded with the most terrible images. What if he returns, only to find the merman has somehow choked in his absence? If, by his negligence or pettiness from fate, infection spreads from some wound? What lies on his bed upon his arrival, not his friend, but a great lump of rot?

Logically, nothing of the kind could happen in such a short time. His anxiety, however, doesn't listen to reason – and, while he can reign it in to adequately perform his duties, it

makes him squirm with a persistent sensation of wrongness, that plagues him as his clammy hands punch in dots and lines.

Conscious effort has to be employed to control his pace, impede him from running to Phoenix's bedside like a mother to her sick child's – but the unbridled, overwhelming relief that washes over him when he reenters the room to be greeted by a merman who appears to be sleeping in peace is undeniable.

He debates whether it is best to leave Phoenix to his rest or wake him for a short wellness check. It would be beneficial to check his injuries again for anything Miles might have neglected, but the last thing he wishes for is to prolong Phoenix's pain. In the end, before he can decide, the merman spontaneously rouses at the sound of his own stomach rumbling.

"Uurgh." He groans in discomfort, a feeling that must've flooded him as wounds were jostled by his stretching. His body remains tense for a moment, and sags again.

"Hello." Miles greets. Blue-brown roll in oil to meet his eyes. "How do you feel?"

"Better." He answers. Another complaint echoes from his stomach. "Hungry."

Miles's mind takes to creating an inventory of all the food stored in his house. *Vegetables, some fruit, dried beef and pork, sausages, there is sufficient for about seven more pancakes* – he lists and, among the reciting in his head, nearly misses the movement slithering away.

"Wait!" He grabs Phoenix by the tip of his tail. The merman responds to the action with an annoyed trill and a glare of his own. "Where do you think you're going?"

The glower melts in a confused, mildly irritated frown, like Miles was supposed to know the answer. "Hunting?"

"Oh no." He slides off the bed and gathers the merman in his arms, tossing him back to his spot. "You are *not."*

"What? Why!?"

"A newborn puppy would hunt better than you in your current condition."

"How you expect me to get food, then?"

"I'll get it for you. Don't move."

Before Phoenix can react and attempt another retort or getaway, Miles is already in the process of turning his kitchen upside down. With a handful of plates adorned by a mess of raw fish, dried meat and a few canned peaches thrown amidst, he returns to the sight of Phoenix on the edge of the bed, arm stretched as he struggles to get down and hissing in pain at the strain on his injuries. More red drips from his gills, although not as much as the lightkeeper expected from such movement.

Sighing in frustration, Miles rests the two full trays on the ground and wrestles the complaining merman back onto the mattress.

“Hey!” Phoenix holds his wrist and tugs, but exhaustion and pain have rendered him too weak for it to be any effective. “You don’t need to baby me, y’know-”

“Sit.”

“-I can hunt perfect fine-!”

“Sit down.”

“-It’s honestly kind insulting that-!”

“Sit. Down.” Miles growls, hands heavy on Phoenix’s shoulders, and his rambling finally stops.

The merman looks up at him, eyes wide, body stilling under his grasp. Satisfied now that he has his attention and apparent obedience, the lightkeeper releases his hold and resumes.

“You will rest and recover. I see you are already healing, therefore you should save energy so your body can utilize it to regenerate. Hunting in your state is unnecessary and will only serve to waste it when you have someone that can provide you sustenance.”

Phoenix’s surprised and slightly terrorized expression melts, morphing into a teasing smirk, and something resembling affection shines stronger in his irises the more Miles talks. By the time he finishes relaying his argument, a full grin stretches the merman’s lips.

“What?” The lightkeeper asks, crossing his arms and tapping his inner biceps.

“Aw.” Phoenix props himself on his elbows, holding his face with both palms. “You care.”

“Of course I do. Are you aware of how troublesome it would be to get rid of your corpse?” Miles scoffs, but the undercurrent of fondness beneath it is clear.

The merman laughs anyway. “‘Course that what you’re thinking about. You care more for the state your floorboards than of your dearest friend: myself… Oh, the woe!” Rolling on his back, a palm comes to clasp just over his heart, the motion so exaggerated and theatrical Miles can’t contain a laugh of his own.

Phoenix appears triumphant at his success in wrestling a few chuckles out of Miles; that brief victory vanishes from his face when Miles’s expression hardens again.

“Now, eat.”

“Urgh. Fine.”

Despite his many complaints and grievances, the shorter arm in Miles’s clock had barely completed a lap when Phoenix swallowed the last of peaches available. The merman seemed apologetic, and reassured him he was fine and didn’t need anything more; a direct contradiction to how his lethargy diminished the more he ate, and the immediate rumble his stomach produced following the statement.

Miles paces in his living room, one side to the other and over again. There are a few supplies remaining in his pantry he had reserved for himself, but he knows that the tantrum Phoenix will throw when he realizes Miles sacrificed his own well-being for his won't be pretty. The net is also an option, but that will compromise the quality of the data his job requires him to be accurate on. Crossing out those two alternatives leaves only the bluish lump that haunts the back of his mind, its dead, beady eyes weighing on his conscience like neutron stars, even though they will never be able to shine again.

Remorse cuts through his heart, as sharp as the Bowie clutched in his trembling hand. He trudges downhill with a jute sack thrown over his shoulder and the cart trailing behind, his gait deliberately slow, trying his best to delay the inevitable.

More blood on his hands, his ghosts whisper to him. *I have no other option,* he replies. In his inner scale, Phoenix's blood will weigh much heavier than the leopard seal's ever could.

He falls on his knees near the corpse. Thankfully, the cold delays the putrefaction, and at least flies and more pronounced foul smells aren't on the list of things he will have to endure. Hesitance makes him sluggish as he rolls the creature belly up and presses the knife to its midsection.

It is right above its last ribs, one of the bigger and most accessible reservoirs of edible meat in the animal's body, so it makes sense; that's where he should cut, that's where Phoenix would logically bite at first if he had made the kill during a hunt. But his hand trembles, and he flinches away as the shaking creates several shallow slashes.

Red wells up and begins to dribble down, paths emerging from where the animal's soul escapes its vessel. Miles holds back a gag. His muscles tense in a feeble attempt at steadying his hand and he repeats the motion.

This time, the knife slides in, and the cut isn't perfect – it's wobbly and rough –, but it will work for his purposes. He cuts three more lines in a crooked square and steels himself with a heartbeat of closed eyes and a grounding breath, before sliding his palms deep into two opposite gashes of the figure. With his hands buried until high on his wrists, he sinks his fingers into the flesh like claws, and pulls, and swallows back the contents of his stomach as a chunk of meat comes free with a sickening ripping noise.

It is thrown in the sack near instantly – he wants it out of his hold as quickly as possible – and he sucks in the breath he hadn't noticed he was holding. Regret is immediate to come; the action merely serves to fill his nostrils with the metallic stench. To make matters worse, he commits the mistake of looking down.

There is blood on his hands.

There is blood on his hands, and pooling underneath him, each additional drop causing a plethora of ripples that lap at his knees. There is blood on his hands and under him and around him, and there is blood dripping out from the hole in his father's chest, and from the hole in Manfred's shoulder, and from his wrists, his thighs, his mangled body on the railway.

There is blood seeping out of himself, abandoning his body to be swept away by the waves, leaving an empty shell behind, a corpse that somehow still stands, that walks on time it unashamedly stole, not borrowed, from hundreds of more deserving souls.

There is blood invading his lungs, so he slowly chokes on it, suffering a fate just like the one he almost doomed Phoenix to.

Phoenix! His mind suddenly screams. The red curtain obscuring his vision recedes, chased away by the thought of Phoenix, lying in his bed, waiting after Miles all but promised to be his caretaker for as long as needed.

That thought is the fraying tether connecting him to the present, to this despicable task, as he strips the poor soul of its flesh and organs. The sack is rapidly filled, and by the time Miles needs to stuff the meat in so it doesn't fall out, he decides enough is enough and he won't stay a second more in this place if it isn't even guaranteed the fruits of his labor will all be eaten.

He leaves the cart in his bedroom without a word and kneels on the floor of his bathroom as he retches, heaves, and tries not to cry with limited success.

It seems that, for once in his life, he was blessed; what he gathered was sufficient, and the torture became just a hazy memory in the recesses of his consciousness. By the third day, thick scabs were in place of gashes and punctures; by the seventh, only angry red marks remained.

With Gumshoe's visit not scheduled for any time soon, he staunchly avoided going, looking, or thinking about the docks in any way he could. In the morning of the eight day, he finally looked, but the remains weren't there anymore; it either rolled off into the water or, most probably, Phoenix – who had noticed the general air of sick and anguish around Miles but was wise enough not to comment on it – removed it from its spot and disposed of it somehow.

He was grateful, but still very much wary of a repeat performance occurring. His heart wouldn't be able to take it if something similar occurred but turned out to be more serious than just a scare. So, when, for the second time, Phoenix wasn't in the living room after he woke up, his stomach dropped to lodge itself somewhere under the floorboards.

He threw the window overlooking the docks open, flinching slightly at the loud *bang,* and frantically looked around to find that familiar speck of blue.

The panic left him in a breathy sigh.

Phoenix was at the pier, laid down on his front with his chin tucked between crossed arms, occupying where is usually Miles's spot as song poured from his lips. His melody was picked up by the wind and carried away, so faint notes were all that reached him.

Miles, perched on the windowsill, watched with fondness and a small, bitter dose of sorrow.

Phoenix didn't show it, but Miles was sure that he was lonely. Here, isolated from everything interesting that there is in this existence with just Miles to keep him company, how could he not be? And now, he stood at the edge of this little world he imprisoned himself in, putting all his heart in a song for the Heavens and beyond.

Would anyone answer his call?

Miles wished someone did. Miles wished someone would appear to free Phoenix from the keeper and this place, and take him somewhere that guards all the material and immaterial riches he deserves. But reality is unforgiving even towards the most kind and good intentioned souls, and the keeper doubted such a thing would ever come to happen. Phoenix himself had said that no other like him exists; in these enormous seas, from the shallowest waters to the deepest trenches, he was doomed to wander alone – and it made Miles's heart ache.

The lightkeeper unfolded himself from his position hunched over the windowsill to grip it instead, rearing back for a deep breath.

"Phoenix!" He answered, embedding all his breath into the single call of his name.

The song stopped. Then, from far away, he heard, stumbling on the rocks but eventually making its way to him, a responding call of *'Miles!'*.

He smiled. And, even as he was incapable of seeing so distantly, he knew that Phoenix was smiling, too.

The merman didn't go away and, even if Miles had trained himself to have only the lowest expectations in order to avoid pain and disappointment, he didn't think Phoenix would. He stuck like gum on the sole of his shoe, like the spiky sea urchin that refuses to let go of the immobile rock it chose to attach itself to, until Miles was a part of his life just as much as he was a part of Miles's. Days would pass when both wouldn't leave the other's sight, the small pool of options for activities turning immense when combined to the variety of themes a company can bring. They could bicker about inane nothings by the mornings, read and discuss the newspapers or a book by afternoon, stargaze in mutual silence by night – and, with Phoenix by his side, the repetition never fails to bear a slight difference, so everything is somewhat new, even if in a small, insignificant way.

Especially at night, when the world was reduced to fit within the bounds of the horizon: a small assortment of isles, the sea, the sky, and them.

"You know, a long time ago, I didn't know what the sky was. I only saw this big mass of color hanging over me and thought that if I tried hard enough, I could jump and swim in it."

Miles's head had rolled aside, crinkling grass filling his ears, to gaze at Phoenix as he gazed at the night. He almost shined under the moon, his eyes a sky of their own, a deep, black tear in space bisecting them that the lightkeeper couldn't help but stumble and fall into.

"I used to climb the highest rocks and the highest dunes, and stretch my arms upwards, trying to cut the surface of the night sky, to pluck out the brightest star and hold it between my

fingers."

He replicated the action, extending his hand to the sky, framing a twinkling dot between the sharp tips of two talons, like he could puncture it and pull it close.

"I wanted it, so much so that when I first found a pearl on the seafloor, I thought a star had fallen."

A fallen star? Miles thought with amusement. It's a fun if not naive thought to entertain, that the world would be so kind as to gift you such a beautiful impossibility.

"It renewed my search to get to the sky. Every day I would stare up and plot, every night I would try and try and try again. One night, when I was so, so high on the tallest rock I could find, I reached up, and up, and up, until I almost lost my purchase and slid down it. I was frustrated; I huffed, scowled and looked down, convinced that it was impossible."

His hand came down, nails glinting in the light, stars Miles could reach out to and hold.

"But then, I saw the moon reflecting in the tide pools, and how the animals and rocks and algae and everything else shone in pinpricks of glimmer among the dark water. I looked up, and I looked down, and I realized the stars above didn't move like the ones beneath did, so the night sky surely was much more boring than what I had down here."

Phoenix then fell quiet. Silence stretched around them, bending like time and space did, so they were stuck in this moment extricated from existence. His responsibilities, his sorrows, his past and his present, all so far away, the simple rising of the sun a distant possibility. There, nothing that he couldn't see mattered, or even existed.

"Why are you telling me this?" He had asked, and Phoenix's head lolled to return his gaze.

"I don't know. I think… I want you to know you can be happy with what you have. Of course, your aspirations probably are not boring, and certainly much more feasible than swimming amidst the stars," There was a short pause, a small huff of laughter. *"But you don't need to achieve some grand thing to enjoy your life. You can work towards it while living what you have, too."*

"I don't have anything."

Phoenix gave him a pointed look. Miles didn't speak further.

"And… and that pearl. I didn't see it for what it was. I saw it in the way that was more convenient to what I already believed, even though there really wasn't anything connecting it to my beliefs. It was just… a beautiful thing the world gave me."

Miles startled.

"Not everything is a sign, you know? Sometimes things just are."

At first, their only barrier was language, Phoenix's oratory too precarious to uphold any more serious conversation. However, strangely enough, Miles could always find the patience and

didactics to minutely expound on the meaning of certain words and idioms for him. And, as it turns out, Phoenix is quite the dedicated student – and a very fast learner.

After he took up reading with increased frequency, his speech has drastically improved. Pronunciation is still… not quite what he would call good, per se, but his vocabulary, structuring and general understanding of English are much better than when they first met, and Miles can now sit on the couch and understand what he says as he rambles endlessly on whatever topic caught his interest; feel, surging inside him, pride at something he has done – or, more accurately, helped and enabled.

At this point in time, Phoenix has eaten a solid fourth of his library with fervor, and, half-pitying the enormous hurdle he had to overcome to reach the topmost shelves, Miles bought steel handles he could attach to the front of each shelf to provide the merman anchoring to climb and hold himself to.

That wasn't his only acquisition either: fingerless gloves and arm sleeves when he noticed friction rashes on his hands and forearms; shock absorbers he installs on the cart; wooden blocks and boards, wheels and handles he spent countless afternoons working over, building the perfect stool design for Phoenix to push around and safely access the counter, higher drawers, or anywhere else that is too low for a ladder but too high for his crawling form.

Before he realized, those adaptations were scattered in each corner of his house, and everywhere he looked held a reminder of the one who forced himself into his life, until the keeper's resolve wore off so completely Miles changed his own home to better accommodate him.

And so, he lived their shared days.

"Miles," The lightkeeper looks up from his newspaper to see Phoenix reading over his shoulder. "What is that?"

"Hm? Oh, it's talking about a Texas gunman who made a series of kidnappings-"

"What's that?" He interrupts, jabbing his pointer on the words 'wild spree'.

"An expression for when a person causes a series of events without-"

"What's Texas?"

The lightkeeper throws him a scowl, which is only met with a giggle. "Just kidding. I know what a Texas is."

"But not an article, apparently."

He watches with amusement as Phoenix's face freezes. One could almost see inside his eyes, a miniature version of him rifling through the transcripts of his most recent sentences searching for a mistake, and the triumph that blooms when he finds. "I know what *Texas* is!"

"Perfect, Phoenix. Now, 'wild spree'-" The latter half of the phrase is left unsaid as the merman abruptly perks up and retreats. Regardless of how brilliant an apprentice he is, it should be duly noted his attention span is terribly short.

The lightkeeper lowers the newspaper, anticipating his friend's return and curious to find out what could've so suddenly caught his interest. There is a wide variety of options: maybe to fetch a book he read and enjoyed, retrieve an object he is curious about, or even something he brought here himself and wants to show him – Phoenix does have an endearing habit of rambling over the stories he devours with incredible detail and his own personal remarks punctuating the events.

Soon after, he returns, something slotted under his left arm, and Miles goes rigid at the sight. His heart speeds and, as in an instinctual response, he swipes the box out of Phoenix's grasp.

The thing clatters to the ground. Miles picks it before the merman can so much as react, clutching it close to his chest as he stumbles several steps backwards. An excruciating wave of pain climbs up his torso when his hip hits a vertex of the table, and, even if the agony doesn't find space in the keeper's mind to be properly processed – eclipsed by a flurry of memories and feelings he had thought long defunct but were now triggered by this one, simple object –, it makes the shock painted on Phoenix's face shift hues into concern.

"Miles?" He slowly slithers closer, and Miles is reminded of that first day at the docks, when both were wary and neither knew how the other would act. "Are you alright?"

Only loud pants fill the abruptly claustrophobic space. Vines grow inside his chest and wrap around his lungs until all the air is squeezed out in a shuddering breath. It isn't clear whether it is the lack of oxygen or the wretched tendrils squeezing his spine, but all the strength in his legs flows upwards, as he wobbles in place while gripping the box so tightly the hard cardboard bends under his fingertips.

"Miles?" Phoenix repeats, more urgent and pitched with worry. He abandons the careful posture and hurries over just in time for his tail to cushion Miles's body when the ex-prosecutor, overwhelmed by the protests of all the failures in his foundations, plummets down. The merman lets out some sound that, he thinks, vaguely resembles his name, although barely anything of it reaches him; no sound can cross the rush in his ears – any stimulation coming from the world outside is muffled and drowned in a heavy flow of blood, physical and metaphorical, and Miles has no reassurance but the arms and tail encasing him to fall on.

Pathetic. He swore that running away would work, that it would rid him of all his sins if he inflicted upon himself the worst punishment a human could suffer, if he nailed his own hands and feet to a monument in the hill and was left to rot in a last ditch attempt of seeking redemption. It clearly isn't, however, if even now the mere sight of a small assortment of his mistakes can cause him such distress.

When the present resumes flowing he is still firmly ensnared in Phoenix's hold. The merman stares at him in open concern while he wriggles free with all the grace of a worm and stands up on trembling legs, clasp on the box not once relenting.

"Hey." The merman tugs at the hem of his coat.

Mind too full to think, Miles fights the lead-heaviness of his eyes to look hollowly at him, hunching and folding into himself as a pile of dirty clothes thrown into a corner of the room. The slack fingers of his right hand let go of the container; Phoenix's eyes briefly stray to it, before quickly returning to his blank features. He makes himself comfortable on the hardwood and carefully takes the keeper's free palm in his, absently rubbing small circles. He is so careful, not to scratch, not to maim or hurt, it almost brings tears to Miles's eyes.

"Do you want to tell me what happened?"

The notion of spilling out what he has so rigorously kept guarded travels down his spine in an electric burst, one hundred-thousand watts burning each nerve it comes across. It shocks his messy mind into focus and reorganizes his face in a potent glare that shouldn't have a place in his expression anymore. Wrenching himself away, he jolts upright, squeezing the box like the merman would snatch it at the littlest sign of weakness.

Phoenix tumbles several inches back to allow space for Miles's abrupt motion, staring up at him with something beginning to look like fear mustering itself in his increasingly round pupils.

"Do you see this?" Miles spits, holding out the container and pulling it back close as Phoenix's hand tries to reach for it. "Don't touch these *ever* again."

The merman winces backwards for a moment, nonplussed by such uncharacteristic aggressiveness, by the baring of fangs he wasn't aware the keeper possessed, but his face crumples in determination and he leans onwards, fighting Miles's stare with his own. "Why? They're just court cases, aren't they?" He questions, putting up a brave front, even though fright is betrayed by how typically slitted pupils are now round and swallow a considerable amount of color.

"No." Phoenix minutely flinches but otherwise doesn't seem affected by the sneer. "They are *mistakes,* to be forgotten and serve as food for the moths."

The boxes' mere presence in this place is a mystery. Admittedly, Miles did intend on rummaging through them; he sought to ascertain and catalog contradictions or loose ends overlooked during investigation in a misguided desire of appealing for retrials, so he could bring true justice to those wronged by him and the legal system. After his second and last confrontation with Von Karma, however, when he was cruelly informed of the full extent of his mentor's viciousness and the authorities' dismissal of such brutal actions, he was simply too scared to hit the senior prosecutor head on. He abandoned the conversation, Von Karma, Europe and his morals, and ran halfway across the globe to hide in the end of the world.

In his rush during the preparation to move here he must've accidentally packed the files along the sea of other volumes. And now Phoenix has found – and read – them.

“But why, Miles?” He presses. “If they are so bad, then shouldn’t you go off and correct them? Do you even know what these mistakes are?”

The keeper takes the questions – that border on accusations – like a physical blow; a punch to his gut, a stab on his heart, deep scratches on his throat that cut through his vocal cords. Without even being aware of it, Phoenix stumbled his way across a tear in Miles’s chest to land directly into his heart and that of the matter.

A strangled noise is halfway caught in his throat and he is suddenly in his study; the clumsy noise of the merman struggling to run after him goes ignored.

He wrests open every cabinet door and every drawer, feeling blue-brown eyes pinned onto him with the intensity and precision of a hawk. What seems like years pass until he finds similar boxes tucked high in the furthermost cupboard, and the one in his hands is carelessly stuffed with its siblings. Miles jams the door closed and slumps, his forehead pressed against cool wood, breathing raggedly and rapidly like a man drowning.

Because he is. Drowning in mud, in quicksand, because water would be a death too kind. He deserves to feel the thick tar clogging his airways, each grain of sand rasp against his inside, his sight taken from him long before the disorientation sets in, as he chokes and fights for oxygen that isn’t there, for just a small space in his lungs he can use, and is rightfully denied.

A slight pull on the fabric of his pants guides his eyes open and downwards, to be met with Phoenix, now close. Without any further comment, the merman leads him away from the closet and to a nearby chair. Unneeding of input, Miles sinks.

Face dropping to his palms, sweaty and gummed as his own forehead is, he sucks in a deep, grounding breath. A weight on his leg indicates Phoenix has slotted his chin on the keeper’s knee, much like the keeper told him his dearly departed Pess used to do, and he doesn’t know whether it is tears or laughter that escape him.

“Miles.” The merman calls, to receive a brief hum. “I think I understand what’s going on, and I want you to know it’s okay. It… doesn’t make you a bad person.”

Despite the slight pause, there is conviction in his voice, running deep in the firm but gentle tone; it’s almost enough to convince him.

The lightkeeper parts his fingers just barely, a wet grey eye peeking past the gap.

“Wouldn’t that make me a coward?”

Jagged brows furrow, creating a crease between them that confers the merman’s face atypical seriousness. “I can’t argue if you’re a coward or not, that’s for you to be the judge of. But I *can* insist that it is not because you haven’t solved these problems that you’ve stagnated.”

Doubt manifests in response. How could he have possibly matured as a human being if his mistakes have made his heart, if not dead, then at least maggot-ridden? If, like a tumor, the guilt and sheer regret nurtured by them have vigorously grown in detriment of the healthy parts of him?

'Stagnated', Phoenix said, and isn't that the perfect word for it? Miles has stagnated, and his stillwater existence is poisonous to anyone who dares interact with it.

His wariness must be nearly palpable; Phoenix notices it – the way the wrinkle between his eyebrows turns deeper and he picks himself up from his place on Miles's knee denounce it. He leans forward to hammer home his argument, defending it with a fervent passion Miles feels is wasted on him, that will only sink into pond water infested by parasites and cool to greyed remains of embers.

"Really. Let's make a- how did they call it? A thought experiment." A spike of exasperation pierces through the keeper's anguished fog. Where had Phoenix even learned about that? The self-help books he begrudgingly bought at Larry's insistence surely are at the bottom of a landfill at this point. "Think with me. If, right now, you became who you were a few years back, how'd you react?"

He recoils. His past self is not something he wishes to think about – on the contrary, it's something to be forgotten –, but his mind doesn't answer to his pleas and is lured into the trap even as its presence was foreknown.

If he reverted to his underdeveloped stage, regardless of these nigh two years of shared company, pained whines would be filling the room – Phoenix, slumped and curled in a corner, nursing at least one broken rib and a decidedly broken heart. His little affectionate notes and gifts scattered throughout the house would find a new home in the deepest corner of the trashcan, or perhaps even hurled for the ocean to consume. He would unquestionably let the brambles behind his ribs spill and watch as thorns dig into his one friend without a shred of the mercy he, more than anyone, deserves.

His consciousness musters a rendition, of the fear and hurt in Phoenix's eyes were he to be confronted with Prosecutor Edgeworth, the man whose entire personality revolved around ruthless schadenfreude, and merely that is sufficient to make bile rise in the back of his throat.

He recalls how rotten he used to be, so much so that people could detect his arrival or exit through environment alone, and his presence would be regarded with unease, reluctance and a badly concealed urge to leave the moment a suitable excuse popped into existence. The worst, he thinks, is that it wasn't without reason; he was aware of his state, and did nothing to remedy it – rather, he chose to perpetuate and weaponize it.

He, however, doesn't meander in the Von Karma vast, posh saloons, not bothering to wear a facade of politeness and openly sneering at whoever crossed his path; he is on his battered armchair, with a pattern that has started to fade and a slight dip where he so often rests, as the merman responds with concern and determination to his exhausted and desperate gaze. Despite the absolute vitriol that Phoenix would encounter with that past version of Miles, as of right here and right now, in the study of the lighthouse of Hornos Island dating October 26th, 1965, the merman only encounters a broken man who loves him as much as he can with a heart that feels like it has been irrevocably shattered.

So, maybe Miles can concede that facing the affections Phoenix bestows upon him as a part of daily life and not a God given gift; that, slowly but surely, allowing himself to return them

and offer his own in the ways he can and sometimes can't, already betrays that, perhaps, although not yet good , he is a *better* person.

Blind hatred isn't the fuel for his being, nor is endless search for perfection his drive. Regardless of the collateral damage – of his worldview and very morality breaking apart – he managed to escape Von Karma's clutches, reconstruct his entire life from shambles even if his status is lesser than before, and plainly that makes him greater than both his younger self and the senior prosecutor could ever strive to be in their warped plane of sublimity. He has abandoned the ideal of perfection he was conditioned to reach for even if it led to self-destruction, and now everything he reaches for are the newspapers the crew brings; the knife to make food, the fork to eat it, while Phoenix prattles on at the opposite side of the table; the switches to turn on and off the lighthouse and its clockwork; spiky locks of raven hair and the rumbling trill that follows.

In the wake of this near epiphany, Miles slides to the ground as if boneless. Consternation washes over his friend's face, which rapidly morphs into shock when the lightkeeper, in an unprecedented action, willingly initiates contact by letting his head fall limp so his forehead rests on Phoenix's shoulder.

"How on Earth," Miles sniffs, and lets escape a wry laugh. "Did that work."

The merman has hardly any time to pull him closer and wrap his arms around him in return before he collapses into a weeping mess.

The unbearable urge to cry, that reconvenes itself so shamefully frequently and is always ignored until it recedes, surges again; for once, he feels he should allow it to thrive and come to fruition. The tears come out in undignified blobs of grief, guilt and regret, and everything else he has been holding in for the past months, the past years, the past decades – truthfully, all that has been repressed since he was nine, orphaned and *alone.* Alone to roam the world, despite the bustling manor and the shadows of his mentor at his back.

They were never company. On the contrary, they were the tall, inflexible walls keeping his true company away. When a chip would form – when Franziska slept under his blankets at night after being woken by Miles's uncontrollable shrieking, when he would be awarded leisure time and risked stepping outside the bounds, when Manfred himself would let slip a comment just a little too kind, a compliment just a little too sincere – his mentor wouldn't take long to realize his hold on Miles's leash was loosening, and pull it back with twice the strength.

He punches through those walls, and cries, and cries, and feels his soul wash itself from the accumulated dirt until a large wet spot forms on Phoenix's T-shirt. The dampness against the sensitive skin of his face turns into a nuisance, and he unsticks himself from the merman to find that his cheeks sport matching shiny streaks too.

"Hello." Phoenix croaks, still loosely holding Miles. "How do you feel?"

There is no precise response for that. Too many sorrows were dug, too many old wounds reopened, too many questions asked and answered for him to be able to effectively process

anything. The single thing he is sure of is a feeling of lightness, as Atlas finally lets the world tumble and fall, and looks at it in relief and bewilderment when it somehow doesn't break.

Miles can at last wholly comprehend what people mean when they say that crying is good for the soul – the vines inside him, instead of growing as they are watered, have withered at the touch of his tears.

"Better." He settles on. "I- thank you." There is so much he should say, that even if he wrote it all over all the pages of a Bible it wouldn't be sufficient to properly express his gratitude. But, at this instant, this point in time where he just purged the water in his body and the deeply rooted weeds with it, he thinks this is enough.

Unsurprisingly however incomprehensibly, the man seems confused by such a sentiment. "What for?" He asks, and it's so genuine, so Phoenix, Miles wants to laugh. How can he carry the wit he holds within, and still remain oblivious to the colorful garden he sowed and nurtured in the keeper's heart?

He suddenly finds vocalizations refuse to come. It is a struggle to put the tangled emotions pooling inside in words; vowels and consonants don't sound like they ought to, words have no meaning and sentences become senseless gibberish. Feeling lost and unmoored, unable to make sense of this calm yet strange sea, blanketed by a sky that lacks stars to show him the way, unadorned by isles that could give him reference, he looks to Phoenix for guidance and understanding, trying to convey with his eyes what his tongue refuses to.

"I made you cry." The merman pouts, and, while understanding dances behind his irises, they are yet to abandon the worry obstructing it.

Unconsciously, Miles lifts a hand to wipe the glimmering paths on his face, sensing Phoenix lean into his palm. "Yes, but don't feel remorseful." *I needed it,* he leaves unspoken, *to cry and cry and break down like the mortal man I am,* he knows Phoenix can hear in his silence.

Like a warm beam of sunlight, the corners of bluish lips quirk up, and Miles can safely say it's one of the most beautiful things he has witnessed. The fins pantomiming ears perk, and the lightkeeper smothers a pang of disappointment when he retreats. "I completely get it if you don't want to talk about this anymore, but…" He squirms, hesitant. *"Why* aren't you trying to go after your mistakes if they are making you suffer so much?"

Miles sighs deeply. He dreads the thought of dredging out those excruciating memories, digging with his own bare hands into dark mud to retrieve them. But Phoenix deserves the world, and if this knowledge is what he wishes for, then Miles will take off his gloves, and this knowledge he shall have.

"I tried, Phoenix. Believe me, I tried. But the world is-" What? What could describe the poor state humanity is in, the way putrefaction has buried its tendrils to its core? "-rotten, and none of my efforts have proved fruitful."

His friend's features are inquisitive; he awaits further clarification, food for his curiosity, and, in spite of the fear and exhaustion soaking him to the bone, Miles can't bring himself to be

irritated – this need for the clearing of contradictions, this drive for the truth; it is himself, in a blue-brown mirror.

“See, despite my status being much higher than the general population’s, there are still a few others who have near total or absolute power over my decisions. I made many, many attempts at redeeming my wrongdoings, but said wrongdoings were beneficial to those higher authorities, and so they refused to allow me to rectify them.”

Phoenix attentively listens, wordlessly slithering closer, offering his warmth as consolation and comfort – as a prize for turning around to fight a greyed demon and win. “I couldn’t and can’t do anything, regardless of how much I absolutely despise it. Nothing I can do short of giving away my own life will make a difference, and-” He pauses, before coughing out the lump in his throat. “I am too much of a coward for that.”

There are few things he loathes more than this miserable feeling of impotence, and almost nothing could rival the sheer doom that enveloped him in a thick, stifling blanket when he finally realized his hands were tied. That night, after a tiring day of hopping from meeting to meeting, after tiring months of intensely researching and creating a better system to the smallest detail, of tiring years of being not just a witness but an enabler of their horrifying justice apparatus, and seeing that everything he won in return was a warning – no, a *threat* – to cease and desist from those whom he admired, it at last dawned on him that these structures’ core has already shriveled and died.

And he was powerless to stop it all.

“Hey.” Phoenix pipes up from even closer, rescuing him from the imminent dive into that whirlpool. “You did your best.”

“I didn’t.” Miles whispers, smiling sardonically, as his gaze strays to the customary grey that greets him from outside a window. He can’t discern whether the howling winds are the souls he carries rejoicing in his suffering or commemorating his enlightenment. “If I had, I would be six feet under by now.”

The merman approaches again, enough their heat is exchanged in the air between, and Phoenix’s weak warmth seeps into him and cradles his tired bones. “That’s alright. Not everyone wants to be a hero. And for what is worth, I much prefer having you right here than, you know… Gone.”

Grey eyes slide back down, to look at his companion from above his glasses. “Even if that means I didn’t try my hardest to halt our tyrannical judicial system and, by consequence, threw uncountable lives to the gallows?”

Finally, Phoenix snuggles into his side, nuzzling on his neck. “Yeah.” It comes in a breath. “We’re allowed to be a little selfish, aren’t we?”

It isn’t ‘a little selfish’. It is entirely selfish. He has ruined numerous lives directly, uncountable ones indirectly; running as far as he could to avoid looking at the consequences of his actions – when the brunt of what he caused spans through time and space like a plague –, couldn’t be anything but. And, he reiterates; Phoenix isn’t an idiot. Regardless of not being

a part of society, he has an understanding of humans that is as complete as it is unexpected, and he is capable of piecing together what Miles just told him and his previous position to arrive at an accurate guess of all the terrible harm the ex-prosecutor is responsible for.

Somehow, the merman continues in place, comfortable, slotted on his jugular, fangs tucked away.

A veil of silence falls upon the figures sprawled over hardwood, and for the next couple hours they can be found in the study, on the floor, in the exact same position, frozen and shrouded by melancholy like the two victims of a Gorgon.

Miles reemerges from that blissful void when the solid warmth of his friend disappears. He opens his eyes – that had fluttered closed somewhere during their rest – to watch in vague amusement as the merman tries to climb up the closet and retrieve the hastily stored box again. In a stroke of luck, his tail bats against the cupboard door and the shockwave that results knocks it down. Phoenix rushes to gather the few papers that slipped out at impact and snakes back to the keeper's side.

"So, I was thinking, and…" The box is deposited on Miles's lap. "Even if you can't solve them like you wanted to, just knowing *where* exactly things went wrong might already help."

An indirect proposition is left hanging in the air. The lightkeeper's eyes widen in comprehension.

His immediate reaction is to fervently refuse, chastise Phoenix, because how could such a bird-brained scheme ever bear any positive results? It'll be nothing more than reopening old wounds only to throw salt on them.

But, he realizes as he swallows the retort, can he really affirm that with such vehemence, if blood still pours? If, to this day, he wakes up in pain and trembling on a mattress painted red?

"Fine." He feels the raspy surface beneath his fingers. "Fine. I don't know whether this will yield any helpful outcomes, but we can certainly try."

Phoenix deflates in apparent relief, and snakes nearer. A section of his tail presses against Miles's extended legs – the contact is a source of solace. His fins splay over him as a blanket, and the lightkeeper stops for a brief moment to admire them, for the first time noticing the light grey lining on the edges.

They flutter lightly with a gust of wind. He is woken from his trance; hesitantly, he frees the flaps, and, in shaking fingers, clutches a thick folder.

The merman takes the box away and that one folder is situated in its place. His heart races, and adrenaline is spouted in his blood flow as if stowed inside was the most venomous animal known to men. Slowly, Miles opens it.

Until the last rays of sunshine they pore over file after file after file. These pertain to only five of the four hundred thirty seven cases he prosecuted during his twelve odd years career of perfect 'guilty' verdicts. Of those five, in four he and Phoenix can locate the dark smudges

of nonsensical, contradictory evidence he either distorted or overlooked, and in one they tug at the loose string in the yarn to reach the truth.

Innocent.

“Edgeworth, look at this.” The merman calls for his attention, displaying two sheets of paper. “This one here is the original draft of witness testimony, stating that the killer’s hair was long, wavy and black. This one,” And he waves to the other. “Is the revised version, and it states that the killer’s hair was actually a red afro. I think that’s too much of a change in such a crucial detail for the witness have just misremembered.”

“‘To’ have just misremembered, Phoenix. And yes, I-” He picks the document, squinting at it. He can feel the ghost of a stony gaze on his skull, from when he first read the paper all those years ago. “This is a piece of evidence given to me by my mentor. It’s most likely distorted in some way.” The latter half of the sentence deepens into a near growl – he fights the urge to crumple the fragile evidence into a ball and toss it into the fireplace.

Phoenix shifts, clearly noticing the sudden spike in anger, and to whom exactly it is directed at. Emboldened by the route their day took – Miles, holding his heart for him to see –, decides to poke at his boundaries.

“Care to elaborate?”

“Maybe another day, Phoenix.”

Mercifully, he doesn’t press, instead nodding in assent, and his focus pivots to the contradiction spotted. In what has never once happened, he almost forgets to tend to the lighthouse at dusk, bolting outside at the last beams of light with a muffled swear that's drowned by his companion's roaring laughter. When that’s taken care of, he fetches food for them in a brief trip to the kitchen, and more investigation ensues.

By midnight, several hours later than his usual bedtime, the selected files are done with.

Joe Darke, Lotta Hart, Will Powers and Cody Hackins are the victims of this misshapen ‘justice’.

Joe Darke, while indeed guilty of four other murders, was innocent of the case in which he was trialed and found guilty. Either way, he would have walked the ledge, but the fact he went to it not for his real crimes but for one that wasn't his own is a gross miscarriage of the law. The added factor law enforcement personnel not only worked to conceal a third party’s involvement, but also likely participated in the crime is particularly egregious. He ponders, whether he should or shouldn't hide this new development from Lana.

Lotta Hart was only trying to find a bountiful ‘scoop’ and uplift her popularity as a journalist above common tabloids. She did lie through her teeth on the witness stand, however, her perjury – even as bad as it was, and believe him, it was horrifying – would warrant a mere seven-year imprisonment at worst.

Will Powers was his favorite actor, a man as good a person as the hero he used to bring to life. His greatest mistake was having the misfortune of impersonating a widely known and loved character.

Cody Hackins was just a child.

And it pains Miles that he is the reason Hackins couldn't live past his teenage years; being sentenced to death just short of adulthood is unacceptable, no matter how egregious the crime – that is a lifespan as short as a sheep's, and he was the one to lead the lamb to the slaughter.

These were four people who died a premature death by the negligence of those who were supposed to uphold Justice.

Miles will remember their names.

He is not a religious man, despite the intensely Protestant upbringing in the Von Karma household. At night, however, before allowing himself rest regardless of how exhausting the day was, Miles recites the four names and a prayer. It is an indescribable feeling – there is nothing he can do to rectify his mistakes, but, at least like this, he can honor them; make sure their memories don't fade so rapidly.

That day, Phoenix forgoes his usual routine of vanishing into the dark to stay. He curls into a ball on the ground to the keeper's bedside, and his light snoring is the lullaby that calms his frenzied mind and lulls him into a state of relaxation.

Tossing and turning, sleep just a few inches away from his grasp, what little neurons haven't retired for the night shift focus from his cases to himself, his existence as a whole. He used to wonder, in the beginning, when he battled against the cancerous spreading of a familiar open wound in his chest, what he was; a demon, a traitor, a bane for all criminals, a bane for all defendants, a guardian of the law, a fighter for the truth. His brain would flit through many hypotheses like a child playing with a flipbook; stopping to analyse a few pages, gliding without care over others. The resulting motion picture was broken, completely incoherent, and he had thrown the pages aside in a pile of unanswered prayers to Saint Jude.

Except, a response came. Delayed – when he was so deep into the pit he stopped fearing the dark, and accustomed to black, had begun to fear color instead. Like a firefly that entered the chasm uninvited, it forced him to acknowledge and reconcile with the colorful hues of the world outside again.

Phoenix came, and brought with him a few of the missing pages. The flipbook might not be complete – not yet, at least – but it provides him something: if not anything else, he is Phoenix's friend. Maybe, just simply Phoenix's.

He is aware, profoundly and painfully, that it is not the final answer. It won't be, not while his sense of self is so wholly anchored on another. However, what he now has – it is crumbles, so little, but so much when he has been living in starvation.

Ultimately, it is better to have yourself anchored on another, then in an intangible concept such as 'perfection'.

‘Friendship’, ‘companionship’, or whatever other descriptor that applies to their dynamic could also be argued to be; he himself thought so at the start, when Phoenix was still fighting to worm his way into his routine. But, as he came to know, it isn’t. It isn’t intangible when he can simply reach out and Phoenix will be there, be it as a whole or a part of himself he gave Miles.

Together, they wade through the ruins of what once was the lightkeeper’s life, salvaging what they can and cataloguing what they can’t. Miles can’t quite shake off the bitter feeling of knowing that, when the sand finishes running, this is what he’ll leave behind; these files, these deaths, this unnecessary cruelty are everything the world knows of him, and all it probably ever will, as that sand buries his body and his self with it. No one but Phoenix will know that his eyes water when he thinks about Pess, that he enjoys a children’s play to the point of filling plot holes and fixing the parts he doesn’t like himself, that he has an incurable sweet tooth, that he values a good dose of bickering at early mornings no matter how annoyed he acts.

At least, it is dulled by the satisfaction and peace from doing *something,* even if it isn’t anything substantial, even if it doesn’t change a grain of sand in the grand scheme of things.

So he works.

A tad over a month later, freshly out of the worst days in the calendar and into a brand new year, he steps outside to make the habitual trip to the lighthouse, and freezes on the doorway.

The day ahead of him is of a deep, vivid blue.

The ceiling of gray is so utterly gone not even a single, remnant cloud wafts peacefully for as far as heaven stretches. He stumbles forward, gaze fixed up, body twirling over unsteady feet to find that everywhere he looks, in all directions, all that greets him is a strong blue, darker near the shining sun and lighter around the borders of the world, like tropical waters, like he could extend his arm and dip his fingers in the sky. When his eyes come tumbling down, they once again dive into the deep blue, finding the same shade reflected on the gentle sea. The air hits him in an affable, lukewarm breeze.

He recognizes that he should be scared. He shouldn’t be gawking; he should rush through his work to lock himself in normalcy as quickly as possible – this simply isn’t what he’s used to.

Except that it is. Phoenix, some wide meters in front of him beckons him with an excited chirp, but Miles can only really focus on the way his form melts into the similarly colored backdrop. Eventually, the trills of excitement drop into concern, and that startles Miles out of his daze. He reaches the merman, who analyzes him with a tilted head, and Miles offers his answer to a question Phoenix hasn’t asked yet.

“I’ve never seen it this… blue.”

The ‘it’ is vague, he himself unable to determine what exactly it is pertains to, but he is sure Phoenix understands.

Almost subconsciously, like if pulled by a magnet, he begins heading downhill, his friend trawling close behind. Minutes of calm walking fly by in the backs of albatrosses that cut the sky with their knife-sharp wings, and through a narrow path they arrive at a small beach of greyed sand and colorful shards of shells, engraved between two walls and the ocean.

Phoenix immediately jumps inside. Miles chuckles as a flock of seagulls, cawing in protest at the disturbance, take flight.

Small waves lap at his ankles. There is no hesitation as he disrobes, leaving his garments in a heap on a flat stone, and hops from rock to rock in Phoenix’s direction.

A sense of familiarity flows in his blood. He feels a phantom presence by his side, a strange sense of void, like there should be someone else there to take his hand so he doesn’t fall, even though it is just him and the merman for as far as the eye can see. But Phoenix winds between stones to grab his palm and steady him, guiding him further, deeper into the expanses, and it doesn’t bother him as much anymore.

Chapter End Notes

TWs for: animal killing, animal butchering, blood, graphic descriptions of injury, implied past self harm, implied past suicide attempt, panic attacks. I think that about covers it.

Miles's shotgun is a Toz BM-16 if anyone wanted to know.

If it wasn't clear I aged Cody up to 16.

Now for the newspaper mentions (in order of appearance):
>house paint: The Kiowa News - sep 10, 1964 p. 5
>balloons: Jornal do Brasil - sep 1, 1964 p. 17 (yes he can read portuguese bc he is in latin america and i haven't found newspapers for hispanic countries yet)
>hostages: The Altus Times-Democrat - oct 6, 1965 p. 2

See you next month!

Archeological site of a family

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Miles wakes up to his alarm clock announcing the beginning of another day. He slaps it silent, and the sound dies to reveal Phoenix's undisturbed, peaceful snoring hidden beneath.

After a moment of careful deliberation, he crouches to give him a few affectionate scratches. A pleased hum escapes him at the silky smooth feel of ebony strands under his fingers. The merman stirs, but doesn't wake, leaning into his touch even during unconsciousness.

When he does return to a state of awareness, the lightkeeper greets him with fresh fish and a stack of files.

Since the unearthing of that box and all that came with it they have worked tirelessly, wading through the dense marsh of all this paperwork, volume denounced by the unprecedented growth that list of names has experienced: from those first four to the current twenty two. At Phoenix's insistence, he calmed himself and his obsessive need to revise the cases; rather, he designated a few hours from the early afternoon – that would sometimes prolong until and bleed into nighttime – to the task, aiming to avoid exhaustion for both.

"You don't need to rush. Time is not really lacking", the merman had said, and he begrudgingly agreed.

With those stipulations for preserving their health in place, they progress at a steady pace of a case a day. It is when one more name is penned down and Miles is organizing the sprawled papers that he finds Phoenix perched on a window. His gaze is wistful, marginally tired, and the lightkeeper approaches. "Phoenix? Is everything alright?"

"Urgh." A groan answers. "My brain hurts."

"I imagine it must be quite exhausting for your single brain cell to work for so long."

Phoenix lifts a jagged eyebrow. "Do I have to remind you it was this one single brain cell-" He taps his skull twice. "-That caught that discrepancy between the report and the photo? Bet you wouldn't have noticed half the contradictions if I wasn't here."

"I am currently noticing your enormous ego, although I do have to admit you're awfully efficient at detecting forgeries. May I ask what is your secret?"

"Why does everything need to be a secret? Maybe I'm just that good."

Miles softly smacks Phoenix's head with the folder in his hands. "You ought to humble yourself some."

"Oh, yes. *I* should humble myself some, says the guy who drinks his tea in gold adorned teacups. Absolutely."

“It is no fault of mine you lack taste.”

“I lack *money.”*

“Not the ego, then?”

“Shut up. Can’t I even complain about being tired anymore? Really, I don’t understand why Mia and Maya aren’t here yet. Two heads think better than one, imagine four – we would know where every grain of dust was during the crime.”

Miles blinks, once, slowly, and his face crumples in a frown.

“Who?” He asks. It must’ve sounded somewhat judgemental, because Phoenix levels him with that mildly chastising look reserved for when Miles is crossing the line between playful and rude. But, something else must also feature on his face; the merman’s expression falls in surprise with no little confusion sprinkled amongst, and the sentence he speaks is slow, as if the keeper was an infant who needed for words to be all but spelled.

“Mia. And Maya. The other two people on this island.”

A slight breeze whistles outside.

“... I’m sorry, *who?”*

Phoenix’s jaw drops, and if it wasn’t by the firm barrier of wood it surely would have dropped even further. “You’ve been living here for *three years* and you don’t know who Mia and Maya are?!”

Miles can't say he knows what is happening anymore. “Phoenix, I’m sorry, but you and I are the only people on this island. There is no ‘Mia’ or ‘Maya’; I would certainly know if there was.”

The lightkeeper readies himself to keep arguing; Phoenix, however, doesn’t seem so interested in doing so, as, instead of a response, he gives Miles an incredulous look.

Nary a sound leaves his lips for such a long stretch of time that discomfort begins to well inside him. The merman’s unwavering gaze does nothing to mitigate the uneasy sensation of being under intense scrutiny, and Miles needs to run a conscious check across his body to certify himself that he is not squirming. Finally, Phoenix seems to overcome the initial bafflement – he spouts a few undignified, frustrated sputters before gathering himself in a sitting position and pinching the bridge of his nose.

“Edgeworth.”

“Yes?”

He freezes to then flail for a second, like he hadn’t thought that far ahead on what he would say or do and is trying to convey his feelings through frantic gestures. Some heartbeats pass while he tries to form a coherent sentence; with a slight manic edge to his voice that drags the question upwards in pitch, he settles on: “Are you joking?”

“Have I ever been known to joke?”

“But-! Maya told me she *slapped you in the face.* They were sure you’d seen them!”

“I am confident I would remember it had I been physically assaulted by someone in the last three years.”

“Oh my God.” And he looks devastated. “You’re being serious.”

“Of course,” Miles pinches the bridge of his nose, a bit annoyed, a bit concerned. “Why wouldn’t I be? You are the one who is not making any sense.”

The exchange ends there as, instead of furthering it, Phoenix scurries halfway to the door in an amount of time so impossibly short it renders the lightkeeper speechless and stunned.

“Phoenix, just-!” The sentence is left in half. His words go either unheard or ignored while he watches the tip of a blue tail disappear beyond the door frame.

Outside, the merman crawls East. The arm sleeves and gloves – which Miles made sure were to be built with the latest Kevlar technology – perform their role with perfect adequacy; yet, he shouts for Phoenix to wait for a brief moment so he can fetch the rolling cart.

It crosses his mind that he could, hypothetically, just not follow him. But, even if his words resemble those of a madman and Miles couldn’t help but worry for Phoenix in the same way he had worried for himself a couple years ago, the historical precedent for following whatever idea took hold of the merman regardless of unknown or unpredictable results has only positives to tell of. That is, disregarding the time he insisted on rolling downhill as a more effective means of transportation and ended on Miles’s bed, whining in pain whilst the lightkeeper patched him up.

“Where to?”

Phoenix, made in a comfortable ball atop the cart, points to the direction he was headed to. “Go along the cliff.”

With that simple instruction in mind, Miles starts walking. The cart behind him is nigh silent thanks to the suspension system he installed, and small talk doesn’t seem to interest his friend. Instead, his chin is slotted over crossed arms, eyes surveying the distance.

He does that a lot, the keeper has noticed. However, while at first he thought it was born from a desire of crossing the line of the horizon, he has begun to doubt such a notion.

It is difficult to interpret what Phoenix might be thinking or feeling based on expression alone. Miles has never had the seamless ease people appear to normally possess when it comes to reading others’ faces as if they were open books, but the merman proves an even more intriguing and challenging enigma than is usual. Despite almost always wearing his heart on his sleeve, freely handing the keeper whatever was going through his head and heart, it is in these moments, where both are so absorbed in themselves, that his face turns almost completely apathetic.

It sometimes makes Miles's most hurt senses, the ones that detect ill intention in any unpredicted variable, wonder whether Phoenix is fabricating his behavior for some ulterior motive. Although, that idea is quick to dispel – not for any tangible reason, but because he feels he could never be that comfortable around someone trying to manipulate him in any way; not as the sheer amount of experiences he unfortunately has with people of the kind is a permanent injury in his brain. At some point nearing the end of his career he came to trust his gut feeling, and it whispers that the merman wouldn't, in a million years, wish him harm.

So it leaves intact the question, if Phoenix's bleeding heart is on sight because it naturally came to the surface, or because he tore his chest open on purpose.

This 'Mia' and 'Maya' might just be a part of the answer. Seeing whatever strawmen Phoenix has put up with those names attached to will certainly be a few more pieces for him to assemble, complete the pattern and get a little closer to a bigger picture of the merman. The constructed personalities these two characters have could also point to what Phoenix feels is lacking on this island and his present company – although, he might just prefer being surrounded by more people, in which case the keeper doesn't see a means to help; even for his friend, he doesn't think he is quite capable of putting his solitude in jeopardy.

Two more people on this island. It is… a strange thought. Not only for the insanity of it, but because Miles can't remember what it's like to have others around. When he tries to imagine sharing these handful of square kilometers he is confined to with a couple more inhabitants his mind comes up blank, except for a lone, dark smudge of pure, concentrated discomfort.

This land is his. As well as everything that exists upon it. Who are these two to intrude?

All that is contained within the horizon – the sea, the rocks, the sky, the dark soil and yellowed grass beneath his feet – has watched him be slain by his demons, has absorbed his corpse and blood so they were one. In return, Miles has fought, stood at the beach while his pieces bled into the grey sky and sea and weaved between the minuscule grains of sand, a stick in his hand he drew a circle around himself with. Inevitably, however, the ebb and flow of the tides washed it away, the perpetuous winds threw revolved soil back into the grooves he traced. This land claimed him, with as much vehemence as he tried to refuse its grasp.

He does not want others in.

He does not want another pair of feet to crush the grass that reaches upwards. He does not want another body to bathe in the waters that surround. He does not want another hand to pick up shells on the way. He does not want another who the fish might find preferable to him.

Somewhere during the track Phoenix pipes up to indicate he should take a diverting path; a narrow trail of scarcer vegetation that leads to that old, decrepit post. When Miles questions the instruction his pointer continues firmly in place, so he pushes his suspicions aside and abides by the direction.

Two odd hours after they've left home, the lightkeeper stands gazing at the ruins while his friend snakes to it.

It hasn't changed since he last visited. Black mold devours the walls – with it, the physical remnant of the missing family –, odd stones and scraps partway eaten adorn every corner, light filters in through the holes in the ceiling, the dirt beneath can be seen through broken planks. But, on the outside, under the front window, some bird has nested.

Phoenix leads the way. The merman crosses the threshold between rough grass and rotten wood to call:

"Mia? Maya?"

His head flits around, searching for any sign of other presence besides them. The keeper has now been successfully convinced Phoenix has gone insane, and follows closely as he slithers further inside. "Are you here? You can come out. Miles's a cool guy."

Miles waits a few moments for the penny to drop, his friend to realize there is no other soul in here – but the pendulum swings and no such realization dawns. His patience is chipped away by each passing second; ready to manhandle his friend out, the lightkeeper steps inside, and it is precisely that second a translucent hand chooses to materialize, fingers threaded on Phoenix's hair.

The merman leans into the touch and preens. Miles recoils in shock.

Parting from the wrist, color begins to bleed and spread backwards, painting the form of a girl into the room. Soon after, though this time from the feet, another woman with similar – but more mature – features, also appears.

The lightkeeper was under the firm belief his friend was suffering from a psychotic episode or an event akin. Now, he wonders if this is, instead of a simple hallucination in the part of his companion, some sort of collective hysteria – because it simply can't *be.*

The young woman pets the merman furiously, scratching his hair, down his scalp, till under his chin and neck. Phoenix croons and grins like a content cat under the attention, causing the elder to chuckle warmly, the younger to redouble her efforts and Miles to grit his teeth while something uncomfortable creates pressure from inside his ribcage.

"Nick!" Cheer coats her tone; yet, he wants nothing more than to fetch Phoenix and go back home – keep the merman far away from their reach. Return to and curl up in their comfortable, shared loneliness.

The elder steps forward and the girl stops her incessant petting. Occupying that space as the younger slinks back, she crouches on one knee to give Phoenix a brief scratch under the jaw. "Hello, Phoenix." She speaks, her tone so saccharinely gentle it almost makes Miles gag.

"Mia!" Is the joyful answer in the merman's beautiful tenor. She smiles and retreats, not without first giving Phoenix a head pat that, from anyone else, would've looked like an extremely condescending act, but from her somehow took the appearance of an endearment. A colder breeze weaves between the broken, moldy walls. The wind outside begins to howl.

The two ghostly sisters now stare at him with a hardened expression, to which he reciprocates with a scowl. He isn't fond of them, and it seems that the sentiment is mutual.

"This is Miles." Phoenix breaks the heavy tension, acting oblivious to its existence even as the mood is thick enough it's a surprise his claws don't slice right through it when he gestures. "Miles," The dull back of a talon nudges his leg. "Introduce yourself."

The keeper coughs, trying to clear his throat of that awful jealousy. Mia narrows her eyes and her gaze sharpens, in contrast with her younger sister, whose tongue is childishly sticking out.

"Miles Edgeworth. I am in charge of the lighthouse Southwest of the island."

"Oh, yeah." The younger one – Maya, if the other is Mia – scoffs in a manner that would be serious if her cheeks didn't resemble a pufferfish. *Franziska,* his mind supplies. *Why does she look so much like Franziska?* "We remember when you broke our home."

Phoenix makes a confused little sound at that, which is willfully ignored by all parties in favor of a scathing remark that the keeper retorts with. "Well, I was correct in assuming nobody lives here."

"We do!"

"Emphasis on 'lives'."

"Miles." The merman tries to interrupt, and is disregarded once again.

Maya's fists close, red spreading on her face while her eyebrows scrunch up into a childish glare. "Come on! It isn't just because we're dead that you're allowed to be such a jerk! Haven't you ever heard of 'respect the dead'?!"

"You're supposed to respect the dead's memories as they are expected to be unable to defend themselves. It does not apply to *you,* seeing as you're both right here, somehow. I am confident that gives me leeway to be a-" His fingers rise in sardonic air quotes, further fueling the ghost's fury. "'jerk'."

"Miles!" Phoenix calls, louder, but Maya barrels over his distressed exclamation to meet the keeper head on.

"Y'know what? Fuck you! I don't know why you're being such an ass, so just go to Hell with it!" She surges forward to push him away, but instead of knocking him back her hands and forearms disappear into Miles's chest. A glacial cold spreads from where the limbs are burrowed into him, a paralyzing frigidity ensnaring his heart as if she had closed her hands around the organ, ice spreading inside him even though his functions haven't frozen.

The keeper flinches, throwing himself a few steps backwards; the distance he gains is sufficient to leave her reach, and it allows for the frigid feeling to dissipate. A snarl builds in the depths of his vocal cords, clambers its way up, claws past gritted teeth.

"I should be the one to go to Hell?! Forgive me if I am wrong, but it is not *me* the errant soul in this room-"

"Miles!" Phoenix shouts, trapping his wrist in a clawed hand, employing such force the tips of his talons dig into pale skin and draw small pinpricks of blood. The lightkeeper hisses and recoils, scowling at his companion, betrayal starting to simmer and fester in his stomach like he was made to swallow a bottle-full of arsenic.

These last three years; they were a farce. An illusion caused by the naivety that lingered in him through it all, one of finding companionship in another outsider, so they could be alone together and build a life away from everything to rejoice in each other's isolation. Two foreigners who found home in each other. Yet, here Phoenix is, inviting those intruders into what Miles thought was theirs and only theirs.

Isn't this betrayal of the highest order? Luring him into a false sense of security so they could share the effort of building something great, and then sharing the products of their labor to those who do not belong?

"Please, for the love of God, Miles." The merman looks fierce, in the same fervent, beautiful way that surfaced when they began their journey of rummaging through old cases. The fact it is to defend *them* makes his guts knot tightly together. "I don't know what they did to you, but this can't possibly be warranted. They are my *friends,* okay? Be nice, and if you're not, then we're leaving."

"I wouldn't be particularly opposed to leaving." The lightkeeper swivels around, flicking his hand so his wrist is freed and Phoenix's own is seized in his grasp instead. One step towards the familiar grey later, merman dragging behind him, Phoenix seems to decide he has had enough. His voice raises to bellow a passionate objection.

"Hold it!" He shrieks, strong but high and scratchy, oddly animalistic. That gives Miles pause. "You should at least make an effort! Don't you want – don't you *need* more help?"

His tongue is cocked with a firm *'no',* venomous and aggressive as a spitting cobra. Why would he trust these strangers? Why would he trust *Phoenix,* if he has lied to Miles and doesn't show the smallest sign of remorse?

How cruel he was, to make the keeper think he had found another like him, to emerge from the sea as someone who was dealt the same cards yet had won the game. He looks down, lets his eyes roam and take in the image his friend forms, mildly angered while searching in his memories for all the times Phoenix has told him he was alone, has consoled him by merging their isolation into one. He has done so multiple times, hasn't he? When he…

Miles's eyes slowly widen as he comes up short of any instance, no matter how hard he hunts between the wrinkles of his brain.

Through the records in his memory he is unable to find any transcript of a time when the merman stated he was alone; just his own thoughts parroting that testimony as consolation for his woes, with no sign of the source.

He has told himself they were threaded together by their loneliness, built this dome in which he and Phoenix were each others' own and no one else's, without ever asking whether that was reality. No affirmations of the kind were ever spoken, written, or maybe even thought;

Miles, lonely and hurting, led himself into believing so, based on nothing but baseless assumptions and a distortion of Phoenix's response when faced with a question on his kin.

Idiot. He is – or, used to be – an investigator. He should know better than to accept and presuppose off of evidence in halves.

His resolve wilts. The merman is determined, brows slightly furrowed – intimidating but not frightening, *never* frightening, just intense while he nurtures a flame the keeper is in awe of –, a spark in his eyes indicating the last thing he'll do is relent.

So Miles concedes.

His posture sags, his grasp on the tan forearm loosening and eventually vanishing. Though he does so begrudgingly, he rewinds his path to revindicate his spot from a few moments back, staring down at the women who don't show any more satisfaction with the current situation than he does.

"Phoenix," And the lightkeeper deliberately sets a palm on the merman's hair, his intention clear to the sisters and – Miles suspects – to Phoenix himself, even though his eyes turn round and innocent. "Says you can, somehow, help. He wants to make this work, for some reason that slips my comprehension. For that, and *just* for that, I am going to invite you both into my home, so we can rest and discuss any possible assistance from yout part."

"Hey!" Maya protests, stomping angrily but noiselessly, and Miles's eyebrow twitches at such infantile behavior. "And *why* are you so sure we're going to help you? It's not like you're a nice person politely asking for it-"

"Wait." Mia unexpectedly cuts in with a lifted palm, speaking for the first time since greeting Phoenix. Her gaze is just as piercing as it's been since the start, but there is a small glint of else, a spark more calculating and somewhat lukewarm that makes a swift flame of uncertainty flicker alive inside him. "You said your last name is 'Edgeworth', is that right?"

He aims for confidence, but his answer ends up sounding more like a question than anything. "Yes…?"

Her eyes narrow further, her mind workshopping some idea the keeper cannot logic out, and Miles feels like a corpse on the necropsy table. Charged seconds of pregnant silence travel, sluggish and agonizing, before her expression relaxes. "Alright." Is her final verdict. "We'll go."

Maya's eyes threaten to pop out of their sockets. Miles resists the impulse of throwing a smug look at her, but feeds the petty triumph growing within nevertheless. "What?!" Her head whips to her sister. "But -! Why?! What are you-"

"Maya." The name, spoken with a tone reserved for a parent scolding their child, halts the complaining. "Please. Helping them may be beneficial."

"Huh?" She inquires, voice much too loud, her hands thrown on the air in indignation while she grudgingly follows them to under the clouds. "Huh?! Come on, Mia! What does that

mean?”

Mia, who still directs the lightkeeper that clinic although interested gaze, infused with the disaffection of someone analyzing the fungi in a rotten fruit, keeps quiet.

“Urgh, I *hate* it when you randomly get all cryptic.”

A migraine begins developing behind his eyes. The girl doesn’t cease her grousing until half of the way home when, discouraged by the lack of any satisfactory answer, she decides she’d rather ask Phoenix how he has been – and seems to immediately regret when the response entails in detailed rambling about his and Miles’s shared routine.

Though a glower is etched on his face and shows no signs of wearing off in the course of the hike, they arrive without any major grievances from anyone other than Maya. Once inside, he waits for the merman to situate himself before tucking the cart in a corner, and nigh instantly after produces a stack of files. He slams it on the table, under the confused gazes of the sisters.

“These are the cases from my career as a prosecutor. Phoenix and I are looking through them in search of any odd evidence or contradiction. Give them a read, and if you find anything strange, inform me-”

“Wait,” Maya interjects. A vein pulses in Miles’s forehead. “A prosecutor? You’re a *prosecutor?!”* Before he is able to sneak a word in, some kind of epiphany strikes the girl like lightning: fast and painful. “Wait. *Wait.* You want us to find weird contradictions in your cases. Are you doubting your own verdicts? Did you go on trials with *wrong evidence?!”*

“That’s precisely what we are trying to find out.”

“You *don’t know?!”* She jumps closer, thrusting a pointer in his chest, and Miles is already tired without it having even begun yet. He already levels the axe over his neck every day; another pair of hands helping to swing it isn’t necessary – he’s aware of his mistakes to an excruciating degree, needless of any external influence. But Maya can’t possibly be aware of the secret war waging inside him, so she continues.

“Holy Mother, do you have *any* idea how *dangerous* that is?! What if you wrongly convicted someone?! It is so fucking easy to get a death penalty-”

“I know.” Miles says, harshly, and stands ground for half a second before sagging under the weight of those words and Maya’s aghast stare. “I know.” His tone deflates, wilts and dies.

Her face transmutes between too many emotions far too quickly for anyone in the room to read, like thumbing through a book so fast no word is comprehensible. It travels across every facet human emotion can take: rage, realization, pity and a thousand other things he can’t identify to, at last, halt on begrudging resignation.

“Fine.” She grumbles, and snatches a few files much too aggressively for Miles’s liking. He keeps his complaints to himself, however, and observes as Mia mirrors the motion, albeit demonstrating a sensible amount of gentleness.

They settle on the couch, silent except for the ruffling of paper. Merman and lightkeeper make a few fast trips to the study, retrieving the documents left sitting there, and soon four pairs of eyes unite efforts to scrutinize the piles of information provided.

When Phoenix picks up on a contradiction and he, Miles and Mia begin constructing and discussing possible scenarios over that foundation, Maya scowls at the keeper all the while. She folds into herself as the trio progresses into a spontaneous mock trial. She crushes the page between her fingers as her sister, with sorrow on her face, announces the defendant's innocence.

Her glare persists along the whole evening, gradually worsening at every piece of forged evidence unveiled and erroneous verdict questioned, a hard layer of veneer added at each perceived fault on his part. In stark contrast, Miles's annoyance towards her peels in direct proportion.

She appears so unimaginably happy interacting with Phoenix when she thinks the lightkeeper isn't looking. She laughs and her jokes rival Phoenix's in silliness. And it all brings to the surface the memory of rotting, broken wood that had received a blow not from the slow action of time, but by Miles's then inability to feel in a non-destructive manner.

He had been too focused on what the sisters meant inside the context of his and Phoenix's relationship, which blinded him to the bigger picture. He failed to consider their condition, as outlandish as it is, as the ghosts of dead people inhabiting such an isolated place.

Their time here is unknown. The circumstances that led to them being here are more so. The reason as to why they *can* even be here, instead of vanishing into nothingness or the afterlife, maybe completely outside the bounds of his comprehension. They have been existing here, eternal as time itself, with only those ruins as physical evidence to speak of their being; he cannot fault her for growing disdain towards him when he practically spat onto what remained of them on this Earth.

During the afternoon, when the sisters got engrossed in conversation, he pulled Phoenix aside to inquire on how they had left the post, since they acted as if tethered to it. The merman thrust a couple of claws in his T-shirt pocket and dug out a smooth piece of what looked to be jade, in the shape of a comma and polished to perfection, similar to the many littered on the ruin grounds – if a well-taken care of and precious version of them.

"They are bound to this." He had said, and a sudden flicker of light – that Miles is still now unsure if a stray sunbeam or from the stone itself – gleamed, as if agreeing. *"They can't get too far, so I picked it up while we were there."*

Miles chose to ignore both the seemingly mystical aspect a simple stone could have and the fact he had *not* noticed Phoenix taking anything from the house, to focus on what was said. And it… it fills him with sorrow, to know both these souls are confined to a specific radius around that stone, and have been – if the state of the shack is any indication – for a long time.

Thus, sympathy for the two unfortunate spirits began to grow. Now, he is free to come and go as he pleases – he simply chooses not to –, but he is intimately familiar with being trapped in

a small place, essentially alone, because those who are physically closest are impossible to reach.

So the triumph he held over the girl gradually withered into guilt. He could've been better. He could've shown them – Maya, in particular – some of the kindness they no doubt had become strangers to, from anyone other than Phoenix at least.

He can't rewind time; the ever-moving pointers of the clock have mocked him for that every so often, when the wish to do so would reappear. But he can battle through the fear, the anxiety that poisons him with guilt and shame, to ensure going forward will be a little smoother.

After a great deal of minutes pacing in the kitchen under the guise of grabbing a 'quick' meal, he musters sufficient courage, and reemerges in their warm bubble to ask her to accompany him. A 'no' begins to form on her lips and chases all that bravery away, before a stern look from her sister forces the word back in her throat and the resolution back in his body.

Her steps don't echo behind him, so it is a surprise to turn around, now behind the house, and see that she hasn't taken advantage of that and ran. He wouldn't blame her, if she used her silent gait to slide out of this situation and be carried away by the wind to greener pastures. Maybe even somewhere where flowers bloom – she seems like the kind to enjoy it.

They stare at one another for a few moments till her gaze slips to the ground. Miles's hands fidget, his heart pumping hot energy in place of blood. Maya's translucent form flickers, and for a second he fears the breeze will sweep her until the image re-stabilizes.

It is that – the reminder that, at any moment, she could simply disappear as in a magic trick – that emboldens him to take the leap.

"Maya."

She looks up at him – up, because she's still a child, made eternal by some merciless, sick joke of destiny – wary and distrustful, a glint in her eyes that he can identify with ease for how much he saw it in himself: the one that roams and scrutinizes for any ill-intention, since that is what she became accustomed to receiving from the world surrounding her.

He doesn't know her story; how she and her sister ended up here, or even are here currently, in soul but not in body. He doesn't know what horrible things she has seen, what terrible situations she has waded through, what tenebrous curse befell her to nurture mechanisms so similar to his own in this young tragedy. And he once more chastises himself for failing so utterly to see it swirling in her expression at the shack, letting his fabricated hurt blind him to others with struggles that, whilst presently still unknown, are nevertheless so similar to his.

His head hangs low. "My apologies."

Maya's eyes narrow – more in confusion than distrust, thankfully. She folds her arms and speaks nary a letter.

“I- the way I initially acted towards you and your sister was rude, unwarranted, and entirely undeserved. I was- *afraid,* when I realized you were so near without me knowing, and saw how much familiarity both of you have with Phoenix.”

Her head tilts aside, her long locks swishing like a pendulum, subtly telling him *use your time wisely; you have little to spare.*

“Nick? What does he have to do with this?”

A lump gets caught in his throat, because answering that question will entail verbalizing feelings he hasn’t even taken the time to prod and pick apart yet. While he has not unraveled every last thread and weaved it back together, he doesn’t think he will be fully capable of lacing together words that properly translate every color and intricate knot.

But she stares at him, the creases on her sleeve where thin fingers sit deepening and turning more pronounced, and he knows he’s losing his time.

“While it would be a lie to say Phoenix was the first to show me compassion, he was the first to be so persistent it made a dent in my life. He… is very important-” *To me,* stays tacit in the air. “-And, as far as I knew at the moment, we were each other’s only company. Suddenly coming to know he is acquainted with others – others who live in my- in the same island as me without my knowledge, moreover – made me… frightened.”

That is not the end – far from it, if anything, that’s the instruments singing as the melody crescendos –, but the rhythm continues, building and building and never resulting in anything else, because he is not yet prepared to face the music. He hopes, however, that Maya can spot the subtle plea in his gaze. That strange tapestry is clear in his form, deliberately stitched on his face so he can show it to her rather than being forced to hastily put together an explanation that might not encompass what it truly is, and he hopes the tension bleeding out of her and conceding its space to something softer means that she has seen and understood it.

“Well,” She moves closer and puts her hand to his shoulder, as if to pat him in solidarity, but both wince apart when the tips of her fingers dig coldly into his flesh instead. “I still think you were a jerk, but you’re forgiven for it. Just try to be nicer, okay? Nick’s not the only cool person in the world.”

The lightkeeper feels the room get a bit airier, his shoulders, lighter; a smile – small and more of a smirk, but a smile nonetheless – creeps on his expression.

“I see that you are just as humble as he is.”

“Who do you think taught it to him?”

She grins around the words, teasing, tucking one of her long frame locks behind her ears, and it strikes Miles just how similar she is to Phoenix. He has seen that exact grin time and time again, only difference being the sharp teeth of the version he’s most used to.

The day does not go by without a few more hiccups – a stray tear he can’t quite restrain, a few colorful expressions and rightful scolding Maya does not bother to hold back, Mia’s

silent judgement he was an unfortunate victim of till near sunset – but it would be wrong to deny that his apology, as stuttered and inadequate as it was, was enough to appease the sisters so their presence didn't weigh so much on the environment. The discomfort wrapped around him so he was stiff and robotic did not disappear, but it eased to a light annoyance that faded into the background.

Their prior friendship with Phoenix allows the women and his friend to yarn effortless conversation he can chime in when he wishes to, rather than nurturing a demanding silence that yearns for comments to fill it – sentences he doesn't know how to put together, whose absence would let awkwardness permeate it instead. No; the exchanges melt into the walls to become part of the scenery, and he is free to do as he pleases while the three chat between themselves in a pleasing volume.

It is not without hitches, of course. Maya's curious sidelong glances eventually bud into a question on what brought him here – the papers he held slipped away as if he was covered in butter. Thankfully, while he gathered them from the white spread on the floor, the merman intervened with a convenient and sufficiently satisfying half-truth.

Phoenix took the better part of two years to wrench a word on it from him, and Sisyphean determination needed to be employed in the battle. He does not need these two strangers rehashing and meddling in his woes when both he and them are so clearly unprepared for it.

As glittering ink takes over the sky, he excuses himself for a brief moment to turn on the lighthouse and, upon his return, enlists their help to organize the files that had, slowly but steadily over the course of the day, devoured every visible inch on the center of his living room. Miles sees, how Maya peeks inside his bedroom while he kneels on the foot of his bed with a third woven in his clasped palms, reciting all the names he committed to memory followed by a long prayer he has come to know like the back of his hand, and her expression softens almost imperceptibly.

When he is back in the living room, Mia rises and bids them goodbye, sparing Phoenix an affectionate pet and Miles a friendly wave. Maya follows suit, and the lightkeeper watches from the doorstep as they walk about a hundred meters to the ocean before vanishing into the night in the most literal sense.

The thin wisps of what remained of them dance and disappear in the air like smoke. Miles looks down at his side, to where the merman still gazes in that direction even though there's nothing to be seen, and once again doubts his human sight.

He brushes it off – as he always does – and retreats into the kitchen, becoming absorbed in the rhythmic motions of washing the unwanted byproducts of dinner while his consciousness is stuck stewing on past events. It circles back with insistence to the first encounter between him and the sisters, but slips past them and crouches to gaze into Phoenix's puppy-eyed look.

That tapping has followed him, and can be sporadically heard accompanied by creaking wood and rustling fabric as Phoenix moves from cabinet to cabinet.

"Why the innocent act?"

The abrupt cut to their comfortable silence starts Phoenix a foot back, his head popping out from the cupboard he was exploring and tilting up to face his companion, the sound of running water washing over them. There is no confusion on his expression; instead, there is a faint and brief darkness.

“I had to.”

From the corners of his eyes, Miles observes the furniture door swing closed, grey eyes pursuing the shadow of that blue smear to find it woven between the table legs. Protected by the weak penumbra, his long form settles laying on his stomach, chin on his crossed arms, no noise emanating from the creaky wooden boards beneath.

The dishes regain the lightkeeper’s gaze, though not his attention. “Why?”

“Would you have given each other a chance if I hadn’t?”

“Yes.” Miles answers without missing a beat.

A low, dull sound floats in the air, the result of a weighty something falling from an almost negligible height. The lightkeeper throws Phoenix a glance to see him tense in a startled position while blue-brown do their damnedest not to approach his figure.

He turns off the faucet and braces himself on the sink – still looking inside it even as there is no dirty dish in sight – as an oppressive pressure takes advantage of the void silence to encroach on them.

“Phoenix. I cannot speak for the sisters, but I was not fooled by your display. I knew you were perfectly aware of what each word, intonation, gesture and twitch meant, probably even better than myself. Yet, I gave them a chance anyway, didn’t I?”

The invisible boulder remains undisturbed.

A heavy sigh escapes the keeper, laced with frustration. Must his friend be so difficult? Must he be so intentionally obtuse?

“Dear, I- please, don’t do that. I am not bothered if you keep your secrets – God knows I have a fair share of them myself. I am not bothered if you lie – God knows how much I’ve done so. Just, please, don’t try to – to *manipulate* others. If not your words, allow at least your actions to be truthful. Didn’t you notice that the moment you spoke your truth was the moment I changed my mind?”

That – molding his actions and demeanour as an insidious way of herding events to a direction he chose, the free will of any other party involved notwithstanding – resembles too much the tactics he employed at his worst; he will be damned if he leaves Phoenix’s use of such strategies unaddressed, and risks him spiral into something even just vaguely comparable to the wretch he once was.

The merman is intelligent – almost awfully so, at times – and the lightkeeper is unable to comprehend how such an idea seemed adequate to him. Doesn’t he trust Miles – or the

sisters, for that matter – better than that? He must know that, had he spoken his truth all along, they would've still arrived at a truce; didn't he have faith in their abilities to communicate and dialogue? There was no need for this miserable attempt at control to have happened if he did, at least to the extent Miles thought said belief reached.

The walls groaning snap him out of his thoughts. A glimpse of the table reveals that the spot Phoenix occupied is now empty.

He painstakingly trudges through his nightly routine and hauls his drained body onto bed. Despite the heaviness inside his bones, grey eyes remain open and unmoving, staring at a spot on the ceiling until, an unknown but nevertheless long stretch of time later, sharp clicking cuts the suffocating quiet.

The pattern approaches and stops on the floor by his side, but the usual rustling Phoenix produces as he curls into a comfortable position doesn't echo, rather replaced by a burning sensation that spreads on his nape, alongside a paranoia enveloping his mind.

Rolling to his side, he comes face to face with the glowing, ethereal sheen of Phoenix's eyes in the dark. Fingers graceless with exhaustion lift the blanket and try for a few pats that transform into uncoordinated slaps on the space beside him.

"Get over here. There are already enough ghosts around for my comfort, you needn't watch me while I sleep."

A small, huffed laugh is swallowed by his bed's loud complaints, as the merman jumps onto it without much care for how much impact the shoddy woodwork is able to endure.

Miles's bed is plenty spacious for him, but cramped for two people – especially if one of the parties involved has a tail that is thick and multiple meters long. The result of choosing to share it regardless is the colder smoothness pressed against him, nearly pushing him off the space that was supposed to accommodate him without trouble. So he folds into himself, into a tiny little ball he can slot under Phoenix's chin, along Phoenix's chest, encased by Phoenix's tail, and opens his arms to pull him close.

"I'm sorry." Comes the mumble, spoken in the crown of his head, as if Phoenix was trying to say it directly into his head. "I trust you. And them. I was scared and didn't think." His palm runs till Miles's nape. "I wanted you to get along, so much so I just… slipped into doing what I thought would help the most. I shouldn't have done it. I'm sorry."

Miles hugs him tight until he can feel the movement of his gills, the constant intake of air, the shirt dancing on his slippery surface. Miles holds him like he could nuzzle under his skin, like he could scurry across the openings in his neck and nestle in the hollow spaces in his lungs.

"Miles?" The merman whispers, carding a hand through his hair, a couple of claws deftly undoing a knot in delicate grey strands. His tone, low and quiet like the night, instead of breaking the suspended veil merges seamlessly into it. "What is happening?"

His answer is to lean deeper in the crook of Phoenix's neck, trying to sneak into his throat and settle in his vocal cords only to have that soothing voice envelop him completely.

"Does this have anything to do with Mia and Maya?"

Miles's breathing stops. Stutters. A mutter escapes him, almost inaudible, hidden in the gust that comes spluttering out: "Will you leave?"

He feels, past the twin layers of clothing, skin, fat, muscles and ribs separating them from total union with one another, that Phoenix's heart splutters alike. And it shows, on the waver in his sentence, how his tone flatlines for an instant to keep what sounds like pain concealed.

"No. No, I won't. Why would you think that?"

"You have them."

Pressure increases around him. Those strong arms and stronger tail curl and tighten, enveloping him so completely while not being any suffocating, so it's almost like a second, heavier, sturdier skin. "I've always had. Yet, I'm here."

"Don't go. Please?" It comes out whiny. So unbefitting; of him, and everything he stands for, everything he once *stood* for. *How ashamed,* he ponders, *would they be were they seeing me right now?* Disgusted, too, to see the boy they had sunk so much money and time into relinquishing the perfection they had bought him and trained him to abide by. Seeking comfort and reassurance in the arms of another; a man, furthermore.

Or not. He isn't sure if the merman, in his inhuman status, complies with human standards of gender and sex – frankly, he doesn't care to know either. Phoenix is here, and he is lukewarm but searing, solid but soft, and one of the few certainties Miles has in this world; that's more than enough.

"I won't. I promise."

He isn't sure who fell asleep first; in their near total immobility, it would be difficult to ascertain who was the one most still. What matters is that when we woke up in the early hours, head fuzzy with the indistinct smudge of a dream he couldn't quite recall, Phoenix was there – somehow, even closer.

The following day, he wakes up a few minutes earlier than usual to the chatter from the living room, wide-eyed and paralyzed by the unfamiliar noise for a few seconds before his sluggish mind freed itself from the remnants of sleep, and he was able to recall the events of the day prior. Mia and Maya accompany them when Miles leaves for the lighthouse, and though their gait on the steel steps are silent, their voices certainly are not, and add to the familiar percussion of the keeper's stomping boots and the merman's tapping claws.

An exaggerated performance of pain that Maya acts out upon gazing into the lit lens elicits laughter from her sister and Phoenix, even managing to make the keeper crack a small smile. They tell of sea monsters and tease the merman about mermaids while he jots down the daily information about the sea, and skim their weightless fingers on the spines lining the walls of his library, backtracked by a certain tenor babbling endlessly about his latest read, as he sends away the data collected.

A non-insignificant amount of documents later, which unfortunately don't yield any useful clue or result, he moves to prepare lunch. The chicken turns golden in the oven, and he is leaning back on the counter to watch with interest as Phoenix bickers with Maya over their stock of fish for the month – even though the girl can't eat – when she moves to pick up a still squirming fish and it slips right through her grasp.

"There is still some of the soul inside that fish, so we are unable to touch it." Mia leans close to explain.

Miles starts; he hadn't noticed her approach. She answers to his surprise with a teasing grin. "By the way, I don't believe I've greeted you yet. Good morning, Edgeworth." She greets, and a weak shiver rolls down his spine. It will take some time until he is fully accustomed to being addressed by his family name without contempt embedded into the syllables; Phoenix prioritizes his first name, and he can't say he minds it. "I would like to briefly speak. Alone, if you wouldn't mind."

Miles squints, a tad wary but not very worried – this is Mia, with whom he has engaged in fruitful conversation instances prior. Nodding, he swallows the last spoon of the canned peaches he picked to snack on and disposes of the can, indicating with a wave for the woman to lead the way.

Surprisingly, she leads him to his bedroom, where she motions for the lock in a wordless request to which he complies. There, she fixes him with a stare, stern as that of any older sibling, uncomfortably similar to the one he used to show Franziska whenever she trespassed her limits.

"You might want to sit down for this."

He takes a seat on the bed, glad for doing so once her next words would have knocked him out of balance were he still standing.

"Your father is Gregory Edgeworth, isn't it?"

"I-" The surname 'Edgeworth' is, admittedly, not very common, so it wouldn't be a stretch to presume they were related. What is actually baffling is that somehow, Mia, a ghost residing on this end of the world, holds any knowledge about his father.

A brief flash of anger flashes inside him. His intent for traveling all the way until here was exactly to *not* think about that, to leave behind everything previous to his hiring as the keeper for this lighthouse. And here she is, dredging up the past he fought so hard to keep buried.

Yet, the fire subsides as quickly as it sprang to life.

Phoenix did the same, didn't he? And it proved to be a much more efficient way to heal his wounds than simply forever flee. It's the offer of an actual treatment, rather than just allowing the open injury to fester.

Mia looks at him knowingly, sympathy shining on her eyes, as if she could read the jumbled mess of nonsense circulating in his mind as one would a children's story. Somehow, it makes him feel safe.

"Yes." He confirms, fists closing around the fabric of his pants. "Yes, you're correct."

A smile stretches the corners of her lips, tiny but warm nevertheless. "You really look like him, you know?"

Heat rushes to his face. Baffled sputters leave him until his jaw snaps closed with such strength the sharp clacking of teeth is audible. It has been a moment since he last looked at one of his father's portraits; the knowledge he is now nearly as old as his father was is agonizing, makes it too painful to even glance at his photos – is it fair for fate, the world, God or whatever, to take away such a brilliant mind; such a caring, warm person, and let Miles and his wretched accomplices roam the Earth?

Still, an unfamiliar warmth grows and spreads, just as fast as the despairing vines he is so used to, but far from resembling that harrowing, savage feeling that digs its thorns on his organs and pulls until they're aching shreds. On the contrary, it feels… pleasant. Much akin to when Phoenix first trapped him in his embrace, albeit this softness now radiates from his core rather than reaching it from outside. This doesn't just cause warmth to rise. It also brings a species of pride that is thoroughly foreign to him.

He was proud of being a Von Karma. That is an undeniable fact. But that stemmed from pride that Von Karma had chosen him, that he was good enough to be handpicked by him – a selfish kind of pride originated from the sense that he was better than anyone else around, sufficiently so to be selected among a sea of competitors. This, now, is an innate sense of pride. Pride of being his father's son, nothing more and nothing less.

"Edgeworth." The soft call awakens him, irises snapping from the spot on the floor they had inadvertently veered to and back to her translucent form. Some sorrow gathers in her expression, a subtle warning that causes his hackles to rise. "I don't know if you'll remember, but at the very start of your career, you went against a defense attorney called Diego Armando."

The name is familiar, but Miles can't pick one of the blurry faces in his head to attach it to. It is more than embarrassing – shameful, even – but during that horrid era of his life, Miles regarded defense attorneys as nothing more than irritating lowlife to be quashed and ridiculed; in virtue of those disgusting morals, he can't say he paid enough attention to commit any of them to memory. Even if he had, his memory, his library of broken records, holds very few tapes that feature anything beyond distorted forms and vague sensations.

As the silence stretches and no answer comes from his part, Mia resumes – it is odd, but she seems almost… understanding.

“Well, I was in the gallery, watching it.”

Despite the peculiar lack of judgment in her gaze, the lightkeeper withers under it, drowned by a new wave of shame and mortification. The notion this woman had personally seen and assessed him at his worst makes him want to either kick her out of the house or curl inwards so completely that he disappears.

“As I’m aware you’ve come to appreciate honesty I’ll affirm that yes, you were, as my sister likes to say, a ‘complete and absolute jerk’. And I’ll freely admit that when Phoenix took you to our home I wasn’t pleased in the least about having to spend a single second in your presence.”

The words are harsh. The ex-prosecutor begins to recede into himself, his spine snapping to straight perfection and his expression organizing into cold and professional stoicism, hard as steel in an attempt to create protection. Mia, however, raises a finger, as if to present an antithesis to all that she has said.

“But,” And she pops the ‘t’, in a manner very similar to how Phoenix sometimes does. “When I saw you interacting with Phoenix I started… doubting you were that brat, so much so I had to ask your last name just to be sure. Regardless of how rude you were towards us, I could see how much you care about Phoenix, and I couldn’t believe that unfeeling ‘demon prosecutor’ could ever be a caring person.”

She stops for a second, assessing his demeanour. “You are Miles Edgeworth, and I can’t negate your past by saying you aren’t that boy anymore; you are. But you’ve grown. Even if I can’t guess as to what was the trigger for such a change.”

The lightkeeper freezes, shocked. Something worms its way into him, but it doesn't hurt, it doesn't leave hollow spaces in its wake. It eats – some of – the abscesses growing inside him, leaving him a little bit lighter, taking some of the pain away.

He takes a wild guess, and bets everything he has in this plane that it is happiness . Relief. His efforts weren't in vain – he hasn't been routinely digging into his chest, prodding at his heart, stitching and reorganizing and patching up what he can for nothing. He is escaping von Karma's shadow, the one that no matter how far he ran he could never seem to disentangle himself from, because it had turned into his own. He is destroying it, replacing it with pieces of Phoenix's, the boat crew’s, the sea and his own. Maybe he could get a bit from Maya and Mia’s weak ones borrowed, too.

The picture of his father, the lone one that survived the journey from his childhood till present moment and lives in the bottom of his nightstand’s drawer, appears in his mind. It is fuzzy at the edges, details shifting every time he tries to focus, but he compares it to what he sees on the mirror every morning and allows himself the hope that, every morning, he looks at something a bit more similar to it.

Bafflement gives way to thoughtfulness gives way to a small smile. A smile that turns tearful when Mia complements her speech.

“And, if he were here today, I think he’d be proud of you.”

Would he? Miles doubts that, but is surprised to notice that such doubt is much smaller than the crushing force he is so familiar with. If anything, it is more of a nagging unpleasantness, like a tiny stone inside his boot.

The first thing to come out of his mouth is a question. It is fitting; he has been asking quite a lot of them as of late.

“How come you knew what I so desperately needed to hear?”

Her grin widens, a bit cat-like – mirroring Phoenix’s and Maya’s, if only a little less teasing and a little more smug.

“I looked at you and decided to say something nice. It’s written in your face that the world hasn’t been very kind to you, kid. Just don’t let it get to your head because I will not hesitate to bring you down if I need to.”

No quippy retort jumps to the forefront of his mind, and reacting appropriately to kindness is still a work in progress, so a huff somewhat resembling a chuckle is what he answers with. Mia’s lips part, as to say something else, but a knock on the door startles them closed.

“Uh.” Phoenix’s voice filters from beneath the door. “Miles, I think the chicken might be burning?”

“Shit!”

Chapter End Notes

I'm a bit wary of this chapter, but I think it's good enough. I hope you have enjoyed and that it has answered as many questions as it planted!

I am not sure if I'll be able to maintain the schedule of a new chapter every 18th; my classes began a couple weeks ago and we've already been bombarded with five group works -- one of them being a theater piece that involves everyone, and my class isn't exactly... easy or pleasant to work with. Plus the fact electronics in general are now forbidden inside the school even during breaks so my time for writing has been drastically reduced. But I'll try to get it done in time :)

Also, I now have a Tumblr account! I don't post a lot but I check it fairly often, so if you want to ask me something, feel free to send it here :]!

Étude to the empty epitaph

Chapter Notes

Hello! I am very sorry for the extended pause, but I am a bit busy at the moment -- I am here only because I couldn't let MerMay go without an update. On a more positive note, I took advantage of the break to play AA4 and I'm halfway through AAI1 (I've been operating basically on spoilers and a few fragments of playthroughs until now K), so I have things better planned out :)

Anyways, here's the chapter! Because I couldn't proofread it to my usual standards, I might come back and change things a bit a few times, but nothing big. Also, again, if you're more sensitive and don't mind slight spoilers check the TWs at the end notes!

Thank you very much for the patience.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A couple pages of the calendar have turned. Multiple suns rise with Miles dutifully marking the daily box, absentminded as he basks in the comfort of his friends' indistinct voices and the whispering winds outside. The climate is lukewarm, the last remnants of the dying summer held on by autumn – a welcomed reprieve from the polar temperatures he contends with for the remainder of the year. That isn't to say that they have completely vanished, however; as of a little under two months by now, Miles has had two walking sources of glacial frigidity following Phoenix – and, by extension, the lightkeeper – wherever he goes. Suffice to say, he won't be missing the cold any time soon.

Mia and Maya got used to sitting on the sofa, chatting with the merman about all the inane little nothings offered by this lonely island as if they were world-changing events, like the war would end because the sea is of a slightly livelier tonality today, or another would begin for the tiny seagull chick that wandered a bit too far from its nest. These little stories are collected during their matutinal walks, when Phoenix crawls out of bed and meanders around the island with the sisters while Miles is still wrangling his sleeping soul back into his body, and the newborn sunbeams caress their forms in gentle good mornings.

This comfortable routine they've settled in came quickly, its process of development casual, as if it was always meant to be that way. As if Maya and Phoenix bickering over food while Mia watched fondly and Miles navigated preparing a meal through his sleep-addled senses was nothing more than natural order. As if Mia scolding Phoenix and Maya for getting into trouble that was supposed to be nonexistent in a place such as this had been happening for decades. As if, when a hand settles on his shoulder, or when his surname is screamed from a distance, he had never flinched away.

The sisters' intangibility had proven to be a hassle. Every once in a while, for one reason or another, they would bump – quite literally – into Miles, or vice versa. The cold pain the keeper had to suffer through seemed to be insufficient punishment, as the ghosts also were tormented – *"It hurts."* Maya had said, " *Like fire. Like I'm being burnt."*

It wasn't until a late night when Phoenix, from under half-lidded eyes and cheeks flushed red with some alcohol Miles had forgotten about the existence of, had suggested, in a stroke of genius drunkenness, that they simply use gloves. Miles had been loath to accept that the solution to their conundrum could be as simple, but had been swiftly proven wrong by the experiment the merman proposed to test his hypothesis. His smug, sharp-toothed smile as the sisters marveled while they touched Miles through a thick coat could attest to that.

He had, then, sent Lana a request for two woolen gloves. Two weeks later he would wake up to a sharp sensation on his scalp, and find that Maya was examining his hair with amazed eyes and mischievous fingers, which weakly tugged again as soon as she noticed he was awake.

In general, he would safely classify it as a positive development, but sometimes it could result in rather unpleasant situations. Such as today, now, when he was shedding his pajamas for his day clothes under the white rays of morning, and felt a cold finger jabbing at his lower back with blatant indifference for his comfort.

He grunts as a jolt of pain burns the nerves of his back and crackles through his limbs. In the back of his mind, he acknowledges he should be expecting something of the likes; when he woke up he immediately noticed that the ceiling was the wrong shade of grey, the winds whispered an octave lower than normal, the smell of salt clogged his nose and singed the delicate membrane in a premonition of how he would feel in the night to come as he buried his face in a pillow waterlogged by tears. His bones tell him of a day where the sun rises in the West, but despite all that, he needs to rise and face it anyway.

So, he takes a deep breath, though before he can turn with a sharp glare and sharper words Maya pipes up.

"What's all of these?" She asks, and he twists his neck to see what she's pointing at. What he meets is a bumpy scar, whiter than its surroundings. It's one of his ugliest ones, ironically so similar to a railway in shape, traveling from the lowest of his left ribs to under his waistband on the right side, a hideous concentration of poorly healed skin that twisted and rose in its neglect. Near it, other, smaller ones marr his porcelain complexions; a similar one, thinner but just as long stretching from his tailbone and bifurcating near the middle to reach both his scapulae; a thick and short trail running parallel to his waistband for a dozen centimeters; the myriad of scrapes that look more like scratch marks from an animal than anything, from when death's clawed fingers tried with such desperation to clutch onto him. All reminders of the closest to absolute rest he's ever been, with his body being damaged from every direction: his ribs shredding everything they could reach from inside out; the wood, pebbles and cold metal tearing through his defenses from outside in.

The thoughts bring a chill to his spine, a burning to the scars as if they had been reopened, phantom paths where blood once ran down in currents. He pushes the memories away. It's

not something he likes to think about; blessedly, he never had to, even if his shame has long since ceased being the secret it was supposed to be.

Phoenix knows. Of course, he knows; Miles remembers hearing the strange gurgle of surprise from behind when he had let his guard down and pulled out of his nightshirt with the merman still in the room. He recalls how he froze, how the air became thick with questions that didn't need to be asked to make themselves known and the unbearably stifling thing that could have been pity or empathy – he doesn't think he can distinguish between the two.

Mercifully, all the sounds that came from Phoenix after that stretch of silence were those of rustling, as he turned over on the bed to give the lightkeeper his privacy. Still, he feels how sometimes the merman stares at whatever of his skin is visible, searching for the pale lines and fixating on it once he finds one. He has never once mentioned them, however, and that is something the lightkeeper thanks the Heavens for; it is an unspoken agreement between him and his dear friend, poignant but firm in equal measures: Phoenix doesn't ask, and Miles returns the favor.

Such a deal can't protect him from Maya, and he curses himself for getting too comfortable. He forgot he needs to hide, and now he is a butterfly pinned in place, being demanded an explanation his throat closes around and refuses to give.

"A train." He chokes out, pain spilling from the start to the end of each single phoneme. He tugs the hem of the shirt down forcefully, and dons his coat the next instant. "I fell on a railway."

Moving to leave the room after snatching his glasses from the nightstand, he is privy to a high quality image of how the girl's bugging eyes threaten to pop out of their sockets. She stares at him in a mimicry of a drowning fish, taking far too long to finally push something out. "And you *lived?!"*

He returns her shocked gaze with a deadpan one. A part of him may have died – if it was the one he wanted to be rid of or something else is yet to be determined – but that couldn't be possibly what she was referring to.

"With no other effects?" She amends her question.

There were other effects indeed. The scars that day left on him were not merely superficial – no, they burrowed far deeper than his surface to imprint on his bones, marking his very soul. More than twinge and stretch uncomfortably, like tape on his skin that itches and itches but he can't scratch off, they forbid him from forgetting his final push past the finishing line in the race to self-destruction, as well as everything that led him there.

But it may just be his mind assigning meaning to insignificant blemishes of his body. Besides, with her use of 'effects', it is not a stretch to assume Maya was referring to the aforementioned physical sequelae. So, he pushes his brain's soliloquy aside and answers with that. "I hurt at times."

"Holy shit." She enunciates slowly. "I have to tell Mia this."

Miles swirls from where he was leaving his room, and although the deep glower on his face has proven to be warning enough for even the most hardened criminals, he still spits out a venomous admonition. “You’ll do *no such thing.”*

She shakes her head, not looking at him. “Really. She needs to know there’s someone even more crazy hardy than Nick out there.”

If cautioning the girl is a lost cause, Miles gives her an absent grunt instead, hoping that in encouraging that train of thought, it may bury her previous idea. “I didn’t know it was possible to beat poison and glass – and whatever the hell was all that stuff with the blondie, but apparently you did.” She mumbles almost inaudibly to herself, while he heads for the calendar.

A strangled curse silences Phoenix’s and Mia’s quiet conversation on the sofa. They crane their necks to find Miles with a hand on his hair – a shipment is due today, and his exchange with Maya took the chunk of his morning he would usually dedicate to routine. By now, if he is being hopeful, the ship must be nearing the docks, and the crew has undoubtedly begun to question his absence. Such a thing has only happened once, on the third day he would be receiving the provisions; a nightmare and a heavy consciousness had pinned him to the bed, and what made him free himself was a worried Gumshoe shouldering his front door off its hinges and Maggey’s shrill call of his name.

Phoenix perks up, ears snapping upright. His head then whirls to the still-curtained window giving not a glimpse of outside and, as Mia fades out of existence, he backtracks into the arm of the couch opposite to the door in a manner much akin to a scared cat. Unbeknownst to Miles at the moment, and as how he finds a minute later while picking his keys, that was a sign those events from so long ago are due for a repeat performance.

At once and with a resounding slam, his door is nowhere to be found, and in its place is a broad figure in a battered olive coat, a cap-wearing head on a skinny neck peeking from over one shoulder.

“Mr. Edgeworth!” Gumshoe bellows, adding to the strength with which the lightkeeper flinches. His eyes run a wild path around the room until fixating on him, when the man lets go from the wood and slumps in relief, despite the unwavering and burning scowl Miles sets on him.

“Sorry, sir!” Maggey steps around him and salutes, a grimace on her face she swiftly switches for the run-of-the-mill determination. “We found your lateness strange, and were concerned something might have happened!”

“And nothing did.” He hisses, trying to warn Phoenix to hide behind the couch with subtle hand movements while walking forward to set himself between the duo and his friend, hopefully aiding in keeping him out of view. “So if you could do me a favor and return to the ship so the provisions may be unloaded, I’d appreciate it.”

The merman, however, is too out of his wits to pay attention to his advice, claws digging into the upholstery, teeth bared at the perceived threat and fins flared in a display of warning – Miles can only be grateful he retained enough restraint to impede his dorsal fin from

following along, thus avoiding the destruction of yet another of his prized shirts. It does not take long for Maggey to notice the out-of-place shadow – their gazes meet and lock into a trade terrified on both ends.

Gumshoe joins the staredown for a second. Instead of becoming enraptured, he looks at Miles.

“Mr. Edgeworth, what-?”

“Enough!” He says, not loud enough to be a shout, but sufficiently authoritative to make all eyes turn to him. He takes a hold of the door and attempts to steer the couple outside – his plan is instantly thwarted by Maggey throwing her arms up, a wide smile spawning on her face.

“Wait, wait- Mr. Edgeworth, sir, can we bring the kids? Please, pretty please? They’d love to see a real, actual mermaid!”

At the mention of children, Phoenix untenses. He seems more confused than anything, throwing Miles a look he can translate as the apt observation of *‘what is wrong with these people?’.* He returns it with an eye roll he hopes conveys the – admittedly fond – annoyance he feels towards the two.

He moves to refuse, however, he is once more impeded from talking. This time around, Phoenix releases a short trill to catch his attention and, making sure he succeeded in doing so, nods.

“Fine.” He parrots the nod to the couple. “Bring the children. Bring the supplies, too, since you’ll travel the path anyway.”

“On it, sir!” She salutes yet again, and leaves the door, her mutterings of ‘a real mermaid, I’m so lucky!’ and ‘we’ll have to hold her back’ going more and more silent. At the same time, Lana appears; she makes no note of Phoenix beyond a quick sideways glance and a slight widening of the eyes, rather preferring to deposit the jumble of newspapers onto the coffee table.

“Here, Mr. Edgeworth.” She begins organizing them in a neat pile, meticulous as always. “February 9th to March 16th.”

Gumshoe has followed after his wife and all who remain is Phoenix who, while not comfortable, doesn’t seem like he will bolt out at any moment anymore. Miles judges it safe to avert his attention and give Lana a grateful nod. “Thank you, Lana.”

When he raises his head again, Mia is there. Shock freezes his body and he assumes a deer-in-headlights posture, which must be a perfect mirror of how Lana looks as she stares at the ghostly figure that materialized in front of her.

“Lana?” Mia asks, raising a tentative hand, as one does when not sure if the person addressed is who inhabits their recollections, or they are not quite what you remember them being. It’s

an almost mournful tone, of someone preemptively grieving the memories of an old friend, as if asking *'is this you? What happened to you?'*.

Lana inhales a sharp and painful breath, ducking her head. "Good morning." Answers her clipped tone. "Mr. Edgeworth, I'll turn off the lighthouse and fill the weather report for you. Thank you for receiving us in your home, and I hope we'll meet again next month." She addresses him, the form in front of her left further unacknowledged, and disappears in a speed that can rival the apparition's own.

Miles stares at Mia, who in turn stares at the portal of grey Lana vanished into. His gaze veers to Phoenix; the merman has known Mia for a stretch of time that is undetermined, but surely considerable, and so the lightkeeper hopes he may provide any kind of answer or clarification. Of course, he doesn't; despite how he is in tune with Miles's thoughts to a frightening degree at times, mind-reading still does not feature on his list of skills – however, his face gives a clue: it is plagued by sorrow, the hurtful kind that wishes it could bear the other's pain. Miles might not be entirely sane, but he is right regarding this; there is history between the two women, and a bloody one if this brief interaction is a trustworthy gauge.

There is no opportunity for questions; Mia fades away. Soon, Gumshoe and Maggey come in, the former pulling a full cart and the latter herding two toddlers inside.

The children, Verónica and Antonio Byrde-Gumshoe, sometimes are brought on trips as reward for 'good behavior', as Maggey told him when they were first introduced to the lightkeeper. If asked, he would struggle to describe what it is exactly, since on that occasion the children were just shy of three months old and unfit for parameters of 'good' and 'bad' behavior, but with the couple cooing over the then babies, he decided it would be best to leave them be.

Now, the toddlers, who he cannot deny, look so much like their parents – though, curiously, the boy resembles his mother more closely, while the girl does her father – waddle inside. Verónica, taking after her dad, enters at once and without any regard for whatever she may or may not be interrupting in a small flurry of dark-haired energy. Antonio lags behind over uncertain legs, soon following his sister at his mother's encouragement.

Before the children can take notice of him, Phoenix shakes his head as in an attempt at dispersing the heavy tension that had grown in the room and, when the kids find him, he puts on a smile that doesn't quite reach his eyes. The twins run over to his direction, incapable of coherency as of yet but making their feelings known with happy shrieks Maggey gently shushes. Phoenix introduces himself, adopting that saccharine tone of voice people usually do when it comes to small children.

Miles notices he has been rooted on the same spot for some long minutes. The room is normal, he reasons, but also stifling and heavy, too loud, too bright, scratching at the inside of his skull in a way that accentuates the siren's call of the nothingness underneath his blankets and makes him very much want to heed to it – it is shameful, how he needs to resist the urge to yell at everyone to just shut up already. He hauls himself away, abandoning the overwhelming ruckus in favor of helping Gumshoe unload and organize the cargo. Too much has happened in the last half an hour for his peace of mind; focusing on this task aids in

calming it a fraction. The beginning of a migraine starts spreading behind his eyes regardless, ivy-like as it grows and stings.

“So, you got a mermaid now, Mr. Edgeworth?” Gumshoe inquires. Miles slots a can of preserved peaches on the back of the furthermost cupboard, giving a noncommittal grunt as reply, unwilling to engage in conversation.

Unfortunately, it seems the sailor has taken it as permission to follow on.

“And here I was thinking I’d a pal with a heart of ice. I thought you wouldn’t give up being alone for nuthin’, what’d he do?”

Miles wishes Gumshoe would focus on the precarious pile of boxes he is constructing rather than this perfunctory exchange. The thing wobbles and he worries his provisions may topple at any moment.

“Ooooh, I know what mermaids do…” The lightkeeper loathes the tone he adopts and frowns in advance, leaning backwards as Gumshoe puts an elbow to his poorly built tower for non-existent support and tilts closer. “Did he… put a *spell* on you or something?”

That is far enough. “Oh, quit that, Gumshoe.” He grumbles, pulling away completely with the intention to tidy up his refrigerator in the kitchen, but deciding against it at last moment when something compels him to hear what Gumshoe has to say. “You act as if I am unable of comradery.”

Silence. Blessed quiet the keeper has been wishing for since the break of dawn and that makes itself present at the worst possible instant.

“Really, pal. I don’t even know your birthday.”

A cruel retort gets caught on Miles’s teeth. He almost wants to let it out, make it known that if he has let the matter be a mystery then it’s not by accident. The single positive connotation his birthday holds is the distant knowledge it’s a year closer to the ultimate form of rest; otherwise, it could be stricken from the calendar for all he cares. What is there to commemorate about such a date, when his simple existence only goes to showcase the multiple ways in which society has failed?

Phoenix would tell him he is being bitter, that surviving is already motive enough to warrant congratulations; logically, that is true. But, he can’t shake off the just as logical thought that he shouldn’t be surviving in the first place.

It is not that he seeks death – no, he is far past that, *has been* since he rose from bed to fetch water one night and the sight of the merman snoozing on his sofa prompted the realization that, were he to leave, there would be shards in his trail with no one to pick up. That was before the reveal of the sisters, and after they settled into his home as naturally as another brick on the wall, it served to add to the amount of things he could not let go of.

It is that, in being alive and well when in a just system he would long have been punished for his actions, he is a walking symbol of everything that is wrong. If the world was fair, he

would've been caught before any poor soul walked a ledge they were undeserving of, and commemorating his birthday would be all but a distant musing trapped by steel bars or six feet of soil, its only remembrance a date scrawled in stone among countless others.

Yet, he is here. And the event is not only possible as, and he realizes so with dread starting to pool within, might happen soon.

"Because I realized that, and also that I never gave you anything, I decided to bring somethin' for ya."

A medium sized box slides out of the dangerous structure to fall on Gumshoe's hands, though Miles highly doubts it was a planned move. Nevertheless, the sailor thrusts it into his chest to a cheerful 'happy birthday!'. He eyes it, wary, and opens the – strangely heavy – box in spite of his actual feelings, knowing Gumshoe would not back down while he didn't do so.

What meets him is his own reflection, crisp on a polished and varnished cinnamon surface. He frowns and tugs on a side of the box, trying to ascertain what the object is without needing to remove it from its package, and attached to a light cream mesh is a single word in blocky letters: 'Grundig'.

He pales. This is a radio, from a german brand, moreover. These things aren't cheap by themselves, and he doesn't want to think about the hurdle it was for it to make the transatlantic trip.

"Gumshoe, I-" He looks towards the man, sure that his inner conflict has bubbled to the surface. "I'm sorry, I can't accept this. It's- it's far too much." Attempts to return the gift to the man's arms are made, but Gumshoe rebuffs all of them, pushing it back into Miles's chest without faltering.

"No can do, pal. I got a raise and thought I'd do somethin' nice. Really, you'll need it-"

And then, something really strange happens. Gumshoe cuts himself off, teeth clacking with the suddenness with which he does so, eyes wide as if he'd been caught red-handed during some unlawful act despite the normalcy of the words uttered. Abruptly, the lightkeeper's mood does a backwards flip, and he sets the box on a nearby table, allowing a scowl to consume his face.

"Gumshoe." He growls, seething venom. The man cowers. "What happened? *Spit it out."*

"Uh-" The sailor stutters, conflicted. Miles's eyes narrow, the resulting sharp scowl harpooning through his uncertainties.

"Look, pal, I-" Gumshoe stops, sighs, and tugs at his coat to rummage for whatever catastrophe is nestled inside. "Maybe you should sit down for this."

Miles ignores the advice, surging forward to snatch the newspaper Gumshoe retrieves when the first corner of it peeks outside washed and fraying olive. Blocking out the sailor's surprised sputtering, he unravels the neat roll the paper was made into and lets his wild gaze

free to hunt for the source of this bad omen. There, on the fourth page, he meets a very familiar face.

'And dies the God of prosecution.' spells the glaring headline – succinct without relinquishing pomp, just as the man himself.

The rest of information filters in, though his mind is still stuck to that headline. A heart attack, borne not by illness or injury but simple old age, had snuck inside his ribcage at the dead of night. Early morning rose with a maid's gasp when she'd found his corpse, pale and stiff in the picture of the marble statue he so wanted to build. His assets; lavish mansions, empty land, his gold and jewels to the last grain of dust gathering in his inventory – all, of course, left to Franziska, with only a fraction, the minimum required by law, destined to Anne. A last way to mock Miles, the lightkeeper thinks, to rub it in his face that all this time he was only his legal ward, never a son, never family.

Their estranged older sister, predictably, refused to give a statement to the press. Miles, for his part, couldn't be found. Franziska's cold words might be shocking to the unaccustomed eye, but they were nothing the lightkeeper wouldn't expect from her: *'Do not worry yourselves. This matter will be solved shortly with minimal interruption to any process that might've been affected.'*

Straightforward and unfeeling – perfect, one might say. Perfectly poised and worded to give the necessary information in as few words as possible, with no gap around the letters where emotion could show its ugly self. Just the way he might've spoken had it been Miles or Franziska to die. Just the way they were taught to.

He wishes he could make sense of the void inside his head. It was a careful beast, that crept inside his skull and devoured his brain so he only noticed the complete lack of feeling when a single pang of hurt pierced his heart at the thought of Franziska, no doubt trying to take the world on her own as she always does. Otherwise, he is empty, enough he can't even bring himself to be scared of it.

It is shock settling in, throwing a fuzzy blanket on all his functions, mind and body consumed by the same static that plagues a TV channel when out of air. Somewhere in the black, he knows he should take advantage of this time of catatonic surprise and tailor the house to his want – namely, usher the guests out, Phoenix in, and find a place soft and cozy where he can forget anything outside exists when the inevitable tears come.

Gumshoe tries to comfort him – Miles bats his hand away. Whatever look he has in his eyes is, by itself, sufficient to send Gumshoe away; by pity or upset, the captain takes slow steps outside to go after his wife and children, who had slipped out with Phoenix at some point while the lightkeeper was distracted. As the door closes behind his retreating form, cutting the main source of light so the room becomes dim with what cold grey filtered through the curtains, he puts his hand to his forehead as if his neck alone couldn't bear the weight, and does his best not to stumble when fleeing to his room.

It is more instinctive than anything; there really is no one else around to see him lose his last shreds of dignity, and God and the Angels have already bore witness to far too much to see him as anything more than worthless lowlife. But, to this day, he feels sharp eyes fixed on his

back, that a reprimand waits for him just around the corner were he to show the slightest waver in composure.

Though, these eyes are now dead.

Such an odd feeling it is. For his whole life he has felt persecuted by that ubiquitous web of connections spanning all corners of the world. The knowledge that he could be found regardless of whatever obscure hole he tucked himself inside has never allowed for him to disarm, lest the sky snitches on his weaknesses.

Now, however, death has freed him. Even if those eyes saw Miles, they'd have no one to report to.

Still, he can't let himself falter, else the walls might cave in and he will have no protection to hide under anymore.

He sits down on his rumpled bed. Due to the rush he was in to receive the shipment, he ended up having to forgo fixing the sheets and blanket again. Distantly, he is a bit happy for doing so – maybe, if he laid down and pretended he had never even arisen in the first place, the universe would follow along and erase this cursed morning from existence.

Seeming far away, a high-pitched chirp fills the house. Phoenix, asking where he is, what's wrong. When it goes unanswered, the merman finds his way to Miles's room anyway – guided by smell, his heartbeats, or the sheer thickness of the air wrapping around him. He peeks past the door frame, a faint and young form accompanying, worry twined with confusion written on their faces. Maya doesn't make a sound, letting the inquiring trill that rumbles from Phoenix's throat speak for the both of them.

Miles, tired, waves them closer. Phoenix slowly crawls, and Maya follows behind with even more hesitance.

The merman jumps onto the bed, curling and pressing against the lightkeeper's side, not a word uttered between them – his tense fins and concerned frown make his feelings clear, but the silence indicates he is willing to wait for however many eons Miles needs. Maya hovers awkwardly on the sidelines, wringing her hands together while her gaze darts from anywhere to everywhere with the sole exception of the lightkeeper's face.

In these last few months, Miles has become acquainted with the concept and practice of comfortable silence. This, he decides, is definitely not one.

The quiet strains, pulled between the fear of speaking out of turn and the question in the horizon. He and Phoenix look at the girl.

"… What happened?" She asks, uncharacteristically timid. "I was hiding because of the guests, and now that I came back Mia is weird and doesn't want to tell me why, and you look like someone just sucked your soul out of your body."

He looks at the closet, back at her. Licks his lips, twists his fingers, releases. Pets Phoenix's tail and runs his index along a fin. Shifts his feet, puts his hand back on his thigh, and takes a

deep breath.

“My…” Just what exactly was he to Miles? “Mentor. He died. Heart attack in his old age – he was nearing eighty –, died in peace in his rest, was found by a maid at early morning and soon taken to the hospital in hopes of a successful reanimation, although those were quickly proven to be nothing more than fickle as he-”

“Woah, woah!” Her hands are in front of her, held up with palms forward in the universal gesture for ‘calm down’. “It’s okay, I got it. You don’t need to give every last detail.”

His mouth, still open to allow the rest of his ramblings through, falls shut. Balled fists grab at the fabric covering his thighs. Phoenix noses at his stomach, chest and throat spluttering like an old machine as he tries to force out a song.

Maya swallows, in a nervous reflex she most likely retained from life. “… Alright. I’m going to… leave… now. I guess. I think those weather papers haven’t been sent out yet.”

She sneaks out. Or fades into nothingness. He doesn’t care to pay attention, busier with tracking the pressure that grows within his bones, coils his medulla tight as a spring. It’s that blanket being pulled away from him with cruel gentleness, bit by bit, so as to maximize the suffering brought on by each little increase. Absently, he knows he is being lowered down, that his head rests on a soft pillow and warmth lays over him, a colder and smoother version of it moving to settle plastered to his side and tangled between his legs.

From what seems like nothing, a muffled melody picks up. He lets himself be lulled by it as the world grows spots and funky, unnatural colors.

At the manner of the rationalists from the eighteenth century, just like his father and, to an extent, the Von Karma household, Miles is in an endless search for a valid reason for each and every aspect of his very being. That is why he cannot comprehend the motive he has for feeling so conflicted; from a logical standpoint, he should feel the blessed warmth of happiness or, at least, the cool waters of relief, at the knowledge a person who didn’t and continued to not bring good to the world and the people in it is now unable to harm anyone. Yet, needle tips still poke behind his eyeballs, and the echoing void inside him doesn’t cease its expansion.

If nothing else does, then is this what makes him a bad person? Does lamenting the lack of such a despicable being make him as perfidious as the one he misses?

Worst are the things he knows he’ll miss. How he’ll miss the sweet, hard-earned praise he’d dish out in sporadic bouts of good humour. How he’ll miss the late nights cross-referencing the multiple books sprawled over hard mahogany while ideas bounced back and forth, the hearty dinners and quiet melodies spun by the needle and the spinning disc.

Such moments were just made sunnier by the iron fist with which he usually ruled the house and its occupants. A trait that latched onto his soul everywhere; were events not to roll out the way he had planned or an action not be performed to his standards, someone would suffer the consequences.

It even extended to one of his strongest convictions: his patriotism. The instant Germany turned its back on his orders he jumped the armored wall of the Atlantic and took a seat on a round table, determined to root out the weeds and get it back under his and his accomplices' control. In the end, not even his chauvinistic love towards his nation could grow big enough to surpass his ego.

After all was contained in 'history' – reduced to cautionary tales of the past, rather than rampaging in the present – many accused him of being a traitor. The overwhelming majority, however, was in desperate need of any person or group thereof that would compromise to feed Germany's flames, so their country could rise back from the ashes left behind by the Allies' operations. And, since fate's irony is never-ending, those same people that attacked the man claiming he had betrayed the Nation and their Leader, scurried across the sea like the flurry of rats they are before the purging of their ideology could even begin.

In the end, he watched them run and scatter overseas with that terrifying smirk painted on his face. As always, he stood victorious where it matters.

Miles does his best to stamp the brief bloom of pride.

The colorful blots in his vision have long been wiped away. He rolls, aimless, and is obstructed by a lukewarm mass. Right, Phoenix is here, and although he sleeps his song lives on, albeit on a much quieter volume. The lightkeeper curls to seek it, setting his head on the merman's chest, close to his throat – where the epicenter of the sound is located.

The clock ticks as he lies there, unbothered. Lightly tracing a finger over the hooks that hold Phoenix's heart and watching the brief spasm before they return to their normal cycle, drowning on the ebb and flow of the melody that resonates through and around both.

Time runs slow, like molasses. Or maybe a mudslip would be a better comparison – filthy, leaving ruins in its wake which just wait for the time it recedes to poke their broken banisters and flaky roofs above.

By the time he realizes his mistake, it is too late.

The pins and needles, attracted by the promise of flesh held in tense continuity, reach his brain. Cotton fills his ears, his limbs, his brain.

Even in sleep, the world feels a few degrees off its axis. His body spirals in nothingness, falling in peace like an autumn leaf when he should be pinned in place. At some point, he begins to pick up speed. Panic engulfs him as he free falls into darkness

When he wakes up, it's to a warm though empty bed. The curtains have been pulled shut, but by the clarity that sneaks across the fabric he can garner it must be nearing dusk.

Faint conversation makes itself present in the background. He strains to understand it beyond the distortions of distance, relief and indignation mixing up in his chest at how inconsequential the topics seem to be. He would think the prior events would call for more serious themes, but it seems it all was dismissed – the way he had wanted, strangely enough.

The second he strolls into the kitchen, however, that notion is destroyed. Though their tones are light, Phoenix's skin is painted a sickly green, Maya bounces on the balls of her feet while chewing on the inside of her cheek and Mia is simply unreadable. The innocuous conversation dies down and all turn to him.

He dithers in place, overcome with the urge to turnaround and dive back under the safe haven of his bed covers. While he shifts, trying to decide, Phoenix takes something out of the oven and sets it on the nearby kitchen counter, tapping with the tip of a talon on what seems to be a porcelain bowl. Tendrils of steam waft from it, and he approaches when Phoenix beckons him closer to see the point of origin of the smoke in a bowl of soup.

Wordlessly, he wraps his hands around it. It's the one that's family heirloom, antique china pigmented with pretty blue birds and flowers. The warmth soaks into his flesh, soothing the biting cold a little.

Filling a seat on the table, he waits for the others to make a move. Phoenix slots his chin on Miles's thigh and rests, reassured that the lightkeeper is present and well. Mia purses her lips, showing the first sliver of genuine emotion in the little hurt that escapes before she vanishes in a thin thread of smoke. Maya sits on the chair opposite to him, kicking her feet.

A glance down reveals the merman to be asleep. Knowing him, he most likely hasn't managed a wink of sleep while the lightkeeper himself slumbered, and the stress of worry got to him.

Looking back up, he meets Maya's gaze again. She stares at him with curiosity and concern, attempting to make sense of his rumpled lines and uncharacteristic dishevelment.

The smell of his food is divine. He blows on the colored surface once, fishes a smaller piece of meat and relishes the meal in the meantime.

"Does it hurt?"

From underneath his eyelashes, he can see she has leaned forward onto the table. Eager to know the answer, though why she covets it so much escapes his comprehension.

"I am not sure myself. I have never been quite able to pin down how I feel regarding him." She bites her lip and returns to her seat, unsatisfied with what she received. It is unfortunate, but that's everything Miles can offer right now – it's all he has. "I can say I'll miss – not him, but the few good moments we had together, and all the ones we could've had."

That appears to appease her more. It's the small bit of concrete truth he can extract from the tangled synapses within him.

Grief has been a miserable presence that loomed over him for his entire life. His mother whom he had never met, pale hair and slender limbs, source of his father's longing and loving looks, who bargained his life for hers. His loving father, firm rock to hold onto in any storm, whom Miles might as well just have killed himself. And then, so quickly after that, he learned to expect being forever mournful of all that Mr. Von Karma could've been to him and yet chose not to. At every reprimand and every cold glare he mourned the Mr. Von Karma

that would have sat by his side and gently corrected him, helped his studies, mediated his and Franziska's quarrels. Still, he clung to the frail hope that maybe one day, the Mr. Von Karma he mourned would be resurrected and rid him of all this grief. That has died with the man and, more than the prosecutor himself, that is what Miles will grieve for.

A new light is then shed on his young companion. Maya. What do the dead grieve? Do they grieve their homes, their lost lives, the lives of their living loved ones? Does the knowledge each passing day serves to write them off history hurt? How much so?

He suddenly feels like he needs to find out.

"Maya." She hums, drumming on the table. He moves to speak and halts; any of the questions he was considering were far from tactful – something more toned down would be ideal.

After a moment of deliberation and the girl lifting an eyebrow in question, he resumes.

"If you and your sister can interact with the physical world, why is the place you inhabit... in ruins?"

Her eyes widen, and her fidgeting stops. She chews on hesitant words, but just when Miles decides to amend his question with a reassurance she doesn't need to answer if she so desires, the reply comes.

"It hurts less to see what is left of us rotting like we don't exist anymore, than to be reminded we're here and yet nothing is the same."

Miles is stunned into silence. Misshapen sentences tumble inside his mind, trying to string themselves together in an appropriate response that doesn't ring as empty platitudes.

They are stopped when he focuses on her scowl directed at nothing and realizes she is struggling just as much as he is, though to organize her thoughts in further detail. With a sigh, he leans back, resigning to his soup.

"It hurts, y'know, to have an oven and never use it because we can't eat anymore, to watch the beds collecting dust because we can't sleep anymore. It just – it puts me in this weird limbo where every second I am reminded I'm dead while trying to pretend I'm still alive."

The scars on his back twinge, as if they were moving. His own lofty history resonates with the statement – it rejoices in the recognition of itself, seeing a mirror for this endless pretense of normalcy poorly dressed on top of an undeniable reality. Would he do any good, to show her she is not alone?

He pushes past the worry he might be diminishing her experiences, and chokes something he hopes is halfway decent out.

"It feels... like you're lying? To yourself?"

"Yeah, but also not just that? I don't know. I've gone through so much. Negating all that is just disrespectful to myself for enduring it and everyone who helped me through and through,

y'know?"

He nods, drinking what's left of his meal. A part of him is surprised that someone this young could have such a shining pearl of wisdom – though maybe he should've expected an early end and a purposeless existence would lead to reflection regardless the age –; his main concern, however, is that it's being thrown to the swine.

A gentle scratch behind the ear causes a sleepy chirp. A slightly stronger one alerts Phoenix of Miles's wishes and the groggy merman shifts a few centimeters away so the lightkeeper can rise. Maya doesn't accompany him, preferring to keep searching between the wooden table grains as if somewhere in there was housed the ultimate truth.

Washing the dishes, the therapeutic, monotonous chore that it is, helps mitigate his frustration with himself – or channel it to another place, as the spotless and unusually shiny kitchen ware might testify to. Phoenix has once again left the dirty tools piled in the sink, but, just this once, Miles won't complain about it. As the last one clinks into its place on the drying rack, he first takes notice of the merman sprawled on the floor, having fallen back asleep right where Miles left him with no preamble or hesitation. Second is Maya, who hasn't moved a finger since he'd last glanced at her, and that the concern was transposed from the girl and his friend to him is undeniable.

He busies himself with the bigger obstruction – in the most literal sense – and gathers what he can of the slithering blue into his arms. Even the sound of what he is unable to hold trawling on wood doesn't awaken Maya from the trance she is stuck in; as soon as he lowers him down on the mattress and Phoenix is comfortable and safe, tucked below a few layers of blankets he is used to joining Miles under and the pillow he unconsciously nuzzled his way beneath, the lightkeeper returns to the kitchen.

It's unsurprising to note not a thing is out of order, conscious being here or not. He does not make an effort to be silent when he walks closer – to avoid scaring her by accident –, but she still does not acknowledge his presence, at least not in any way he could recognize.

She must've, though, because when he waves his palm in front of her face, her neck cranes up so she can look at him with nary a minimally startled twitch.

"Er." Miles says, in lieu of anything substantial, all of a sudden regretting having jumped headfirst into this without a structured plan. "Would you be more comfortable if we moved to the living room?"

She nods, but continues on the chair. He shifts for a moment, feeling awkward and unsure of what to do, as he is unable to touch her and thus to help her up. The hope she would have to move sooner rather than later pays off; long seconds afterwards, she rises and walks away without making a sound, Miles in tow. In the living room, she takes a seat on the couch, and though his eyes stray longingly to the lone armchair a bit farther, he sits by her side.

Dealing with this silence is an arduous task, and he would rue his past choices if this was anyone other than Maya – although, he might make the same sacrifice for his circle; Mia, Phoenix and Franziska, perhaps the boat crew if it was absolutely necessary for it to be him in particular, and no one else. But, he digresses; what matters is that this quietness, which he

would be doing a disservice by describing as ‘empty’ when it holds their kinship and whatever unspoken woes Maya carries in suspension, is at last cut by a hesitant hum.

“I wanted… to tell you something. Too. Just so you know you’re not alone.”

He braces himself. Though she might disguise this as purely for his benefit, a canary in a coal mine sings in the slight and brief crack of her voice.

“I… also grieved someone who really wasn’t good for me. My mom. She disappeared after channeling this one guy for the police force. I don’t know why; the elders told me she was protecting the Fey spirit channeling technique, but Mia told me she did it to protect herself-”

Miles blanches at the surname ‘Fey’. He has to resist the magnetism pulling his conscience downwards to tune out the girl, instead forcing his thoughts to race alongside what she speaks. This, the utterance of this name by Maya, specifically, is the center point that was missing in the web of information he has been stringing, and now an absurd amount of facts and events make sense in relation to and with each other.

However, this is not the right time. Far from it – this is Maya’s moment, and in spite of his many questions and misgivings with the family name, interrupting it would enter the podium as one of the most selfish things he has done since the start of his existence.

“-and she just. Just up and left. Without giving me, Mia, or really anyone else in the family goodbye.”

She stops there, to let the statement sink in; if the pause is for him or her, however, he cannot say. Miles doesn’t doubt this is the first time she has ever said any of it out loud – from personal experience, he is familiar with the weight of words that have been marinating for a long, long while.

“And it’s- it’s weird. Because I don’t know if she’s dead. But I am. And she might not be. And I don’t know if I’ll ever know.” A laugh leaves her, and it startles Miles an inch backwards, because that wryness and cynicism don’t belong in the voice of someone like Maya. “Holy Mother, Miles, how do I grieve someone who’s alive? Especially when I’m not?”

She hunches on herself, and though her face is hidden from this angle, Miles is certain all the tears he hasn’t cried yet are swarming her eyes.

“And- fuck- the worst is that’s all my fault. If only I’d just closed my stupid fucking mouth. If I’d stayed quiet when that attorney came, mom would still be here. Fuck, if I’d stayed quiet when White came, Mia and I would still be alive! Do you know how it feels? I’ll never get to grow up. I’ll never get to become a master like the elders wanted or get a degree like how my sister did. I’ll never get to see the world or eat spaghetti or watch the new Steel Samurai plays. Pearly is going to be my age and I can’t be there to stave Morgan off and fix that damn urn for the thousandth time.”

She heaves – a sharp, painful thing. A classic precursor of indiscriminate sobbing, and acting in some instinct he didn’t even know he had himself, Miles surges forward to hold her pieces

from falling.

“And it’s all – all my fault.” The sobs are let free – or ‘break’ free is more appropriate wording; Maya doesn’t look nor act like she has much agency in how her body is acting. She tries to continue, elaborate, cough out something that has been lodged in her throat for far too long, but chokes on it.

His first impulse is to pull her into a hug. Not because he is used to doing so, but because that is what Phoenix has done to shush and comfort him when his foundations were the ones shaking and crumbling. In the middle of moving to act on it, he thinks twice – there is something else he needs to do beforehand.

“Give me a moment.”

He is loath to leave her alone in such a state, but, as unfortunate as it is, it’s also necessary. Hopefully, the tender look he directs at her can communicate he is not running away or putting her in second priority, only retreating for a brief instant to collect an item which might be of help.

Rushing to his room in a quick-paced stalk, he snatches the first coat he sees in his closet and lugs the heavy garment back to the living room.

“Here.” He holds it to the girl, watching her face turn wary and just the barest hint of a twitch indicative of her reaching out for it. Miles moves the sweater a little closer, pacified to see her overcome whatever were her suspicions to accept it. “Put this on.”

“What is this?” A wet chuckle accompanies the question, but she thrusts an arm into the corresponding sleeve regardless. “You’re giving your clothes away now? First Nick, now me?”

He doesn’t give her an answer. Instead, he waits for her to make herself comfortable in the oversized, soft confines, and drapes the hood over her head, careful to avoid any direct touch.

Due to their size difference, the garment – something in cinnamon, sturdy wool with fur lining the edges and already a bit too big for Miles – looks an endearing sort of ridiculous on her. The sleeves are exaggeratedly bunched to allow her hands to peek, the fluffy hem would almost touch her knees were she standing, and the hood flops awkwardly over her eyes. It makes her look small, yet comfortable and protected. As she snuggles deeper into the fabric, her defensive posture bleeds away.

Perfect, he thinks, and pulls her into a hug.

A hitched breath precedes her weeping beginning in earnest. Miles doesn’t have heartfelt words to accompany this gesture – he merely offers his shirt for her to clutch and his shoulder to be cried on. He doesn’t think he needed to, however; when she retreats, behind the crimson blotches and glittery curtains there is a wobbly smile.

With a murmur that might’ve been her gratitude just as well as a jab at his Steel Samurai pin, she disappears, taking the frigid impressions her intangible tears had imprinted on his

shoulder along. The slight cold to the bundle of fabric left limp in his arms is everything that can attest to the reality of this interaction.

Lasting rays of light cast stripes on the floor. Soon, they'll be rolled and collected again, so they may be unraveled on the next day. A thin stripe of light on the horizon is all they cling to, and Miles follows them outside before it vanishes in full.

White dots today come accompanied by a crib; they rest in peace on a bed of splashed pinks and blues, congregating in tightly knitted conglomerates to join forces in illuminating the night.

Flames, dancing and bright, crackle alive from his doings. His shadow dances on the sturdy glass surrounding him, in quick moves and hops, warm yellow contrasting with deep blue and contoured by sharp white as it waltzes in an almost hypnotizing fashion along the infinite circles of the Fresnel lens.

He has never stopped to give the phenomenon the attention it deserves. Weird, how hyperaware he feels of all those innocuous things of which dismissal used to be a sure fate. They seem – louder, and larger, although not in an unpleasant manner. Maybe, they've always been this way, and he just never noticed.

A slitted eye cracks open when he slips into bed. Miles freezes, but Phoenix's gaze is sleepy and serene, one opalescent iris observing without any judgement or scrutiny. Until a huff comes, that is, and it crinkles with glee.

"Decided to break the Steel Samurai pajamas?"

The lightkeeper scoffs, slightly muffled as he slides under the covers. "You forgot an 'out', Phoenix. And yes, I am; I need to be the example and show a certain someone how to properly respect the sanctity of Steel Samurai merchandise."

"Wha- that was *two times!* One of which was *you!"*

"Two times too many. They were limited editions to commemorate the 25th birthday of the original series and the release of the Nickel Samurai, respectively."

"You're still ignoring the fact it was *you* who tore right through the – what's his name – Mage- Magician- Master-"

"Magistrate. Evil Magistrate."

"-Yeah, that guy's face!"

"Could you remind me why that was?"

"It was not my fault!"

Phoenix pouts. Miles, sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose, not particularly annoyed but disinclined to lose this argument.

“Fine. However, even if I concede that one wasn’t, it still leaves the second.”

“It was not my fault either! Maya scared me! You know I have, like, no control over how my fins act.”

“I don’t know. I think you had great control this morning.”

“Y’know, you complain a lot yet you keep giving them to me. You're aware you can just buy some plain ones and I’m not gonna complain, right?”

Miles has no counter to that. He sneaks a hand in Phoenix’s hair, feigning a promise of pets, and when the merman leans into his touch he pushes down and smothers his face on the pillow. “Stop whining.” He mock-whispers; Phoenix’s brief sounds of surprised struggle become joyful giggles, and the lightkeeper releases pressure with a huffed chuckle to match.

“Okay, ‘kay. Nighty night, then.”

“Goodnight, dear.”

Phoenix wiggles around for a bit to assume his usual disposition, holding onto and wrapped around Miles in a particularly possessive coil. After the merman settles, he shifts his limbs into a more comfortable arrangement himself.

Gradually, the comforting noise of their conjoined breaths disappear.

He is on a dirt road.

The soil under his feet is pale and grainy, small clouds of sand lifting when he shifts his boots. It is irregular, counting with several tiny holes and mounds, although it continues straight for what seems like forever.

The road is not very wide. It should be able to fit double his arm span – maybe triple, at maximum – before it ends at the double rows of decaying wooden stakes delimiting its borders, the old posts connected by a few lines of sloppily applied and loosening barbwire, ripped in some places and rusting in most. Clearly, people don’t pass here very often, else it would at least have been widened enough for two cars to travel side by side.

Up, the sky is a starking blue, cloudless and sunless. To both his sides, he finds green hills, mottled with irregular patches of pastures and copses. It is a bit unnerving – even claustrophobic, in a way – how the slopes begin just after the flimsy barriers as they would around a river, except, instead of running waters, they frame an earthen passage. Worse, still, is how the trees and high grass seem to stop at the mounts’ highest point. Like there was nothing beyond, and what was of the world was closing in on him, serving only to entrap this little stream turned road.

He shakes his head. There is no use contemplating that now.

His gaze sweeps over the scenery again, and this time, at the very edge of his worldview, he sees something. A black dot – no, but it's tall. A black… cylinder? No – a silhouette.

A silhouette. There is someone standing there. He puts one foot in front of the other, legs shaking as a newborn fawn's, not sure why that is himself, and heads to the stranger.

He walks. Almost trips on a couple of bigger rocks and deeper holes, such is the single-mindedness with which he is pursuing his target. For some reason, however, he is taking longer to make any progress than he had initially assumed. He doesn't know for how long he's been walking, or how much he did – really, any sense of time beyond his slow heartbeats, or of distance beyond his strides, is lost to him. Despite the lack of a discernible sun, the heat begins to bear down on him, which is strange. Accompanying the vanishing of the star went the shadows; from the trees, the posts, his own – all of them had been stripped of their darkened copies. He doesn't understand, then, why there would be other effects.

Well, it doesn't matter anymore. He is finally approaching the person, and he can now see that they have their back to him.

They're tall, imposing. Their left hand hangs limply at their side, while the right holds a cane. Only holds, though; regardless of the object's actual purpose, they don't seem to lean any weight on it.

Grey hair slicked back in neat spiked ends. A purple suit and gold ornaments.

Miles looks at him. He has his eyes closed, head tilted down, the air around him grave but not oppressive. He doesn't seem to have noticed Miles's presence.

It is nothing new; Mr. Von Karma doesn't notice his presence more often than not. He hates it. At least when Mr. Von Karma sneers at him and looks aside, *chooses* to disregard him, it shows he was acknowledged – Mr. Von Karma knew he was there, had *seen* him, even if he didn't like it. It was better than being so insignificant he was not seen at all, to be left feeling like a cockroach scurrying in the shadows, unseen, unheard and equal to nothing. It meant that he could be quashed by accident.

Mr. Von Karma still hasn't shown a sign of life. Miles pulls his eyes away to look around for anything else, and is startled by another man standing a few meters away, perfectly in front of Mr. Von Karma so their silhouettes merged into one. They both have shadows, pointing to each other and intertwining in an unrecognizable mess in the perfect middle ground between.

He's a bit shorter than Mr. Von Karma. A trenchcoat covers him close to in full, leaving just his hands, his shoes, and his fedora clad head in sight. He doesn't look real, not like Mr. Von Karma does; he is dull, a bit fuzzy around the edges, yellowed and warm as the pages in a well-loved book. A strange sense of familiarity overtakes him, but, try as he might, he can't quite focus on his face, either shielded from his sight by a fog or perpetually changing.

The man also stays still, so he redirects his gaze back to Mr. Von Karma, to find that the prosecutor is now looking at him.

He doesn’t look mad, though. He doesn’t look upset, smug, annoyed or even the rare glimpses of genuinely happy either – in fact, he doesn’t look anything. He just keeps his void eyes fixed on Miles as he raises a palm and settles it on his pupil’s hair, in a gesture said pupil could almost call affectionate if he didn’t know better.

It’s not much, nor is it bad. He had gone through *bad* at the hands of Mr. Von Karma once before and it's something he has promised himself never to forget; yet, it still makes his knees buckle anyway, and he ends up on the floor just barely avoiding a mouthful of reddish sand.

When he looks up, Mr. Von karma is gone, wherever to. It is confusing to him, not because of the speed with which it happened, but because he can’t conceptualize a place in this world where one could go to. What is there besides this?

The stranger, however, still lingers.

Miles gets up, bats his hands and his trousers to get the worse of the dirt away and approaches the odd man. Standing in front of him, he tries to meet his eyes and fails again. Neither of them attempts to move towards each other.

You’re strong.

He starts. It isn’t the man’s voice, it didn’t come from a disembodied party sharing the environment, from the environment itself, nor from Miles’s thoughts. Neither is it even in his head. So, the words hang there, in their middle, somewhere he can’t see. Maybe, if he could tear into space, he would find them nestled comfortably between the layers of reality.

You’ve always been.

He blinks, and tilts his head. The man mirrors his motion.

Now, close your eyes.

He doesn’t know who this is. He doesn’t know where he is. He doesn’t know which time it is. Has breakfast passed already?

He closes his eyes.

When you open them again, you’ll find the stars a little closer.

Miles opens his eyes.

The grey ceiling of his room stares back at him. A light breeze whistles outside, though its sound is almost completely overshadowed by Phoenix’s peaceful snoring in his ear. He blinks slowly, trying to remember if anything out of ordinary transpired – he knows he had dreamed,

yes, but he couldn't remember the last time he wasn't pulled from one by panic clawing at his lungs, his throat.

It wasn't a good dream – he doubts he can even have those anymore – but, by all means, it didn't seem to have been a nightmare either. In any way, regardless of its nature, it sapped him of his sleep, leaving ephemeral bits of still lingering exhaustion which most probably won't result in rest by themselves.

The stars, he abruptly recalls. There was something about the stars.

Resigning himself to another sleepless night, he gingerly disentangles himself from what he has come to know is a very clingy merman. He tiptoes into his coat, out the door, across the hall and under the starlit sky. Sitting on the ground right there, he ascertains that the stars are not, in fact, any closer.

There is a sudden drop in temperature and, out of nothing, Maya plops next to him with a cheerful "Hey, Miley!"

"Christ-!" He recoils away, before the momentary fear in his face is replaced by annoyance. "Good Lord, I've told you to cease doing that. *Multiple times."*

She snickers, with all the smugness of someone who knows she will continue ignoring his orders and he won't do anything about it. He huffs, thrusting a hand into his coat and throwing the pair of extra gloves dug from a pocket at her. She nods, grateful, and now equipped with the proper gear lightly knocks his shoulder.

"So, whatcha doin' out here in this blessed hour?"

He debates what to tell her. Divulging his dreams is out of limits, always has been; not even Phoenix knows what they are about in detail – although Miles is sure he can put the pieces for a few of them together without much trouble – despite having been woken up in a plethora of different though equally unpleasant ways by the consequences of one. This wasn't a nightmare, however; he supposes it will be fine if he breaks the rule this once.

"I had a… dream."

"Oh." She says. After a moment of hesitation, "A nightmare?"

His right hand wraps around the other wrist. "No." He pauses and, unprompted, continues. "Not good, either. Just a dream."

"Mhm." She appears to mull over his response for a while. And, for that while, it is just them: Miles, crossed legs, looking down at his wrist; Maya, legs stretched forward and hands behind her as support, looking up at the sky. "Wanna talk about it?"

He hums. "Maybe I would, but I don't remember what happened." His own words sound off and he does a double-take at them, feeling that something is not quite right until, from the very edge of his memories, he manages to fish the source of such sensation out. "Well, that would be a lie. I remember one thing."

“What is it?”

“A couple sentences. The last things in the dream, I’m reasonably certain. *‘Now, close your eyes. When you open them again, you’ll find the stars a little closer.’.”*

Maya doesn’t answer. Instead, she narrows her eyes, and silence falls over them.

Then, she turns, an amused star in her eye. “Dunno man. They still look pretty far away to me.”

An unbecoming snort of laughter surges so abruptly he can’t contain it. “My thoughts exactly.”

His gaze abandons his wrist to meet hers, and, in synchrony, both slide up. The night sky above twinkles with its white spots and iridescent hues, comforting in its omnipresence. It doesn’t matter where he is in the world: in the terrace of the Von Karma property, hopping aimlessly from inn to inn, laying on a tiny square with no ceiling to take shelter under or thinking that would be his last sight as cold steel dug into his back; it is, always has been, and always will be there. Before, during and after his brief trip in this world it will remain, and there is comfort to be taken in that nothing he does or doesn’t do can change it.

When he looks aside again, no one is there. Maya has left, wherever she goes to when not here, and he is once more alone with his thoughts and the night. Unconsciousness is yet to call for him, and in the lack of anything to waste his time on, he hugs his knees and watches the world. The sea, endless darkness streaked with white. The ethereal ripple of spindly grass blades, rolling in hypnotizing waves led by the breezes. An ebb and flow of silvery blue, remarkably similar to something he has seen before.

As many things seem to do in recent times, it reminds him of Franziska. Just one more in the endless well of traits she inherited from her father is her vainglory towards her appearance; everything always needs to be in perfect order, and that resulted in a perfectly groomed hair only a few shades off from the twinkling show in front of him, but that moved in much the same way.

At one point, he was an exact copy – if a less valuable one. His vanity knew no bounds and there wasn’t a thing it didn’t consume.

Long since has his hair grown dry and dull, however. It has kept some strong shine, the natural amount for its color, a pretty gift his mother left him, but nothing similar to the varnish finishing look it used to have, that glinted in the light like a polished and well-maintained trophy.

Does Franziska still use the blackberry-scented shampoo? The jar of intricate craftsmanship in thick, black glass Manfred once bought at her behest, and was one of the few things she stood up to her father for. He remembers the argument with stark clarity; how little Franziska argued they could very well take the bottle to a boutique for a refill, and his mentor rebutted with the claim a Von Karma would never be so cheap as to do so.

In the end, for exhaustion at the inane discussion when there were better uses for his time or simple fatherly impulse, the man caved in and allowed her to save it. From that point onwards, that shining blackness found a spot for it to remain forever nestled among the variety of other cosmetics adorning the shelves of Franziska's private bathroom.

When he left to the United States, she was planning to change the tiles from the flowery ceramics to a more mature patterned hydraulic set, insisting she was too grown up for the soft pinks and blues of various blooms and wanted something more similar to her father's tastes – light blues and dark greys, twining and zigzagging in perfectly straight lines on the ground and walls. Did she go forward with it?

There is so much he doesn't know.

Her press statement echoes in his head; those unflinching words that do not belong in the mouth of someone who loves their family – and, even though she would fervently deny it, she does.

How does she feel? Did her world come crumbling down on her? Is she still imprisoned under the rubble or has she managed to dig her way out? It is old news, after all. Two weeks might not be much in the grand scheme of things, but, in the cosmical insignificance of human life, it is more than enough for the late stages of decomposition to begin manifesting.

He should find out. It's been so long since he has last seen her, nevermind hold conversation beyond empty pleasantries. They are siblings, if dysfunctional ones, and as such they understand how each other works – he doubts Franziska has built a net of people to fall onto, procured or accepted any kind of help at all. In spite of the endless connections the Von Karma name has tangled in their web in the most diverse places among the high echelons of society, a rich businessman won't rush to her comfort if she cries, and a Hollywood executive won't wipe her tears away.

It is his job, as her older 'little' brother, to be that person, in particular when he is almost entirely certain he is the single individual she has in that regard.

Besides the reserve of escudos he keeps for emergency situations, there must still be a good deal of deutschmarks in his German bank account he can withdraw. He had sold his suitcase, believing this island would be his grave, but a worn albeit usable backpack is still tucked somewhere in his house. Thank God he decided to keep most of his old garments even if there is no use for a three-piece suit in this place, because Franziska would whip him to pieces if he dared appear in less-than-perfect fashion.

There, it is decided – he'll correspond with Gumshoe and Lana to monitor transportation prices and possible routes; as soon as he has a plan and money to spare in case anything goes wrong, he'll visit her.

All this thinking has consequences; at last, unconsciousness reaches for him again. He retreats to bed, not without first casting a longing glance at the horizon.

Phoenix is awake when he huddles under the covers, eyes half-lidded with sleep and struggling against it.

“You alright? You spent a lo’ of time looking’ at nothin’ ou’ there.”

Miles debates if he should tell him about the dream, but it’s better not. Both he and his friend wish to sleep, and it wasn’t anything that merited a three in the morning talk when rest is an option. “Mhm. Yes, I am fine. Only thinking.”

The blankets rustle as Phoenix shifts, turning to look him in the eye. “Already? T’isn’t it too early for that?”

“... It was an urgent matter.”

A dense haze weighs the mood around them. Every bit of scrutiny Miles was spared throughout the day has piled up to culminate in a piercing gaze that seems to scour through his very soul.

“... And what would that be?” Phoenix asks, enunciation meticulous and dangerous. Miles gulps. He hasn’t planned how to break the news of his trip to Phoenix, under the impression it would be a casual affair with the sole purpose of avoiding a scare when he suddenly leaves, but the whole ordeal has now taken on a weight as heavy as a matter of life or death for no apparent reason.

His reluctance to speak must be clear – the merman’s eyes narrow, making his look impossibly sharper. It cuts past every layer and fishes the truth from deep within him.

“You’re going somewhere, aren’t you.”

An instant of silence that rings like a shot passes, and Phoenix is on him, arms tight around his waist and face buried in his stomach, flailing and nuzzling as if the only thing that could satisfy his need for proximity was being inside Miles.

“You- Miles, hear me, you *can’t.* Okay? Wherever it is you're thinking of going to, you’re not.” He speaks. It causes an unexpected bout of anger to explode in the lightkeeper – never has he heard something so selfish leave Phoenix’s mouth, and if he knew the merman saw him in such a way that borderline reduces him to property, he would have acted much differently. Never again will he let himself be under anyone’s heel, and he thought Phoenix was better than to try to subjugate him so.

“Oh? I wasn’t aware you ruled what I can and can’t do.” Miles spits, hoping the venom burns Phoenix’s delicate skin. “As far as I know, it is *you* who is living in *my* house by *my* rules, and not the other way around.”

“Miles.” The merman nuzzles further in his abdomen, grasp tightening, nails digging into him to a degree that is painful and surely has drawn blood.

For the first time, Miles is afraid of what those claws can do.

“Phoenix.” He wheezes, frozen for a second. That is quick to pass; he thrusts a hand between Phoenix’s face and his body and pushes him back with all his strength, uncaring as to the

awkward angle of the merman's nose against his palm and how his ring finger prods Phoenix's eye. "Let go of me."

"No." A hiss answers. That's all the lightkeeper is willing to take, nerves frayed and rubbed raw by the day's events.

"Then at least tell me what the Hell all of this is about!"

Miles never shouts – he considers himself above it, especially considering his voice by itself can already project well and fill a room; in old times, a single word from him was able to command silence in a bustling courtroom. That is why goosebumps screaming of *'wrong!'* erupt across his body when such a tactic has to be employed – at *Phoenix,* of all people.

It appears that the same notion occurred in Phoenix's mind. He goes still and pale like death itself before retreating, hands yet to release Miles's hips, but now with a more humane grip the lightkeeper can shake off with no effort if he so wishes. When he speaks, the keeper suffers from a brief feeling of whiplash – all the fury has melted into heart-wrenching desperation, whiny and anguished as the last words of so many defendants he has sent to the ledge.

"You can't- you can not go. What something happen? Said there 're persons out for you. It dangerous for you out there. What if get to you? And I not there to save you?"

His English breaks, interspersed and underlined by clicks and hisses, the way Miles only sees when he is scolding Maya after one of her pranks, flustered and frightened. There, right in the end, is the crux of the problem: 'save'. Does Phoenix think he's a hero? Does he think he can simply jump into whatever situation with the potential to become dangerous and solve everything, thinking those shining scales an armor? Those events are restricted to the world of Steel Samurai and other similar forms of fiction, as bitter as it is, and to think they can be transposed to reality is nothing but naive.

"Phoenix- dear," He holds Phoenix's cheeks, moving his face to look at him. Phoenix closes his eyes. "Please. You're not a hero. You can't save me – nor anyone else, for that matter."

Something went wrong. Horribly, horribly wrong, because Phoenix's eyes snap open and he recoils with such uncoordinated strength he almost throws himself off the bed. On instinct, the lightkeeper reaches for him; he halts when blue lips peel back to bare sharp teeth and a growl hits him with the force of a knee to the guts.

The snarl nearly covers his heavy breathing, but, as the only two sounds present in the room, both are pronounced, the odd protrusion to silence that they are. Miles's muscles knit together to stop him from moving, even though he wants to attempt contact again. All he can do is watch as Phoenix flails at the manner of cornered prey, until the merman manages to regain his composure and hurries soundlessly out the door.

He huddles back under the covers, eyes wide and unblinking, resorting to automated movements in lieu of anything else his uncomprehending mind could've come up with. What just happened escapes his grasp – or, it would be more apt to say he never had one on it in the first place. His lack of knowledge of Phoenix has been thrown onto his face.

What bothers him the most is how young Phoenix looked. It might be the fear that made him look like that; vulnerable and apprehensive, lashing out, the many other better options on how to deal with his afflictions unknown to him. He wonders how old Phoenix is. Never has he asked, and never has Phoenix offered, or even given clues that could lead Miles to the answer by himself.

In regards to appearance, the merman looks a few years younger than him – around thirty, the lightkeeper guesses, although there is a not insignificant chance his perception is skewed. It might just be that Miles appears too old for his age, as he always did; too many grey hairs, too many wrinkles and creases weighing his face, too many sorrows and regrets he has only recently come to acknowledge were too heavy of a burden for a teenager and a young adult to carry.

However, he can extend a similar sentiment to Phoenix. Regardless of his lack of excessive expression lines and optimistic demeanour Miles used to confuse with naivety, there is a haunted animal hiding in his pupils, just deep enough to be out of reach, but still visible when an opportunity to pay attention presents itself, and always, always there. He can briefly see it when Phoenix jolts awake at the dead of night and stares through him with those owlish eyes that are incapable of obscuring anything, until the merman focuses on his face and a too-wide smile makes them into thin half-moons.

He wants to know. He wants to meet the skittish thing that lies shallow beneath slippery skin, that breaks out of it for a moment when Phoenix thinks no one is looking and scurries back inside just as quickly at the tiniest disturbance, and curl around it, protect it, make sure no harm ever befalls it again.

But then, he'd be a hypocrite.

Phoenix doesn't ask, and Miles returns the favor.

Chapter End Notes

TWs: somewhat graphic descriptions of injury (nothing like the leopard seal incident, though); we'll get a bit deeper and more explicit with the topic of past suicide attempts; slight references to past self-harm and child abuse.

While writing this I realized most people probably don't know how the inside of a Fresnel lens looks. Here it is, be careful of the loud noises. I actually used this video on my research when I was obsessively trying to understand how IOV lighthouse burners work!

Lastly, I wanted to give a friendly warning; for context: I've been getting a few weird anon comments in this fic, and while I do think most of them are the same person there's been a couple others I think are different people (all of them have been deleted, except for an AI generated one I decided to keep -- it's peak comedy to me). The message I'd

like to pass: I am a minor, watch your words and please be normal. I have no scruples regarding the "delete comment" button so think twice if that's really how you want to waste your time.

That which bites itself

Chapter Notes

Surprise and slightly short(er) chapter! Introducing a new tag with this one.

Also, I kinda tried making a spotify and youtube playlist for this one? It has a little over 35 min and everything is kind of aligned to follow along the events of this chapter but everyone reads at different speeds so I don't know. Anyway, if you want to check it out. It's there. It's all old(er) songs, featuring about half of portuguese, some english, and a taste of spanish and russian.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When morning came, Phoenix was quick to appear on his bedside under the dim grey with a mouthful of rehearsed apologies and, midway, a spontaneous bleeding of sorrow and authenticity that ripped his script in half.

What Miles truly expected more than any apology, however, was an explanation. Some little flap he could pinch between his fingers and use to peel away the tape haphazardly slapped where it bleeds, despite the omnipresent fear of the fact removing it at the wrong time has about the same chance of wrenching out scabs as of letting the wound breathe and heal. Although, his biggest source of concern in this island is in possession of a shimmering form rather than a shimmering tail: Mia, who swam an ocean's distance away even if – not corporeally, also not physically, at least *spiritually* – right here.

Her bond with her sister is strong, and Miles doesn't honestly think anything in this world can make fraught that which has been consolidated by the inexorability of death, but it is tense and perturbed, with this game of tug of war they're playing while Maya tries to reel her back in and Mia is steadfast in keeping herself afar. That fateful encounter with Lana is the origin, they are well aware no matter how reluctant to address it as such, hence why, weighed by the guilt of being the event's cause even if it was bound to happen sooner or later, he has tried time and time again to orchestrate the conditions for the two women to rehash and resolve what it is permeating the air between them, before it could choke them all. As for his schemes, thwarted, by the women's unfaltering sharpness and his own inadequacies.

Nevertheless, nothing of it could drown his primary focus: Franziska, who remained stationary as his firstmost priority. The specter that haunts his friends, as bothersome as it is, doesn't appear to be of immediate urgency and can be dealt with later, which cannot be said of his familial matters.

Squeezing a bit here, thinning his costs a little there – the number in his bank account has at last grown long enough to cover all necessary bases: the costs of the travel itself, any possible emergencies and a small portion to stay at the island if need arises.

This Thursday – tomorrow – when Gumshoe comes and goes, he'll be taken along. Phoenix, head lying on Miles's lap as they watch the night sky together, as clingier as he has become in these couple months after the announcement of the lightkeeper's trip, looks troubled. A stray strand of hair brushes against his temple.

"What is bothering you?" Miles asks as he tucks it behind the fin, answer already known. The merman grumbles and squirms, as if unpleasantly prodded by the question – he is aware of Miles's intentions, that his innocent inquiry is manufactured politeness to ease him into a topic which would be raised either way.

"… When will you be back?"

Miles threads his fingers twixt the dark softness. He lightly scratches to alleviate his frenetic thoughts and relaxes when a fraction of the tension evaporates.

"I'm not sure. Two to three weeks, I think, but I'll stay there for as long as I'm needed."

Phoenix's hand twitches, like he wanted to reach out but held himself back. He seems hurt, an awful sort that is twined with anger and encased around fear. Gutted, almost as if he were a common fish, and Miles, the fisherman. Silence stretches and wears thin between them, uncomfortable and at danger of snapping as a breath restrained.

"… You *will* be back?" He says, a painful, timid thing born from the intersection of fright, question and frail hope. Miles's hand stops for a split second, before he restarts his movements with even more focus, hoping to soothe his friend.

"I will. I promise."

Phoenix is still unsatisfied. Yet to meet the keeper's eyes, a faint frown tugs on his face, tilted towards the distance but that Miles is sure is directed at him. He sighs – nothing he says can appease him, the one thing that could is precisely the one thing he can't do. He cannot stay, not while there is someone he loves in need of help and who, if he employs some conviction, is within reach.

"Dear, I can't always be by your side. I promise I will return, and you have to trust me on that."

A heartbeat passes, and Phoenix nods. It is close to imperceptible; there, nonetheless. More a sign of quiet defeat than the understanding Miles wished for. It will have to be enough, for both their sakes.

They then retreat to bed. Bleak expectations were that Phoenix would roll aside and curl to occupy a farther corner of the mattress, his back to Miles so he could stew in the rankles around his heart without interruption or the source of it looking into his eyes. However, as soon as the blankets cover him, an armful of merman runs him over with what might be an intentional excess of strength, so much so it spares him from tossing and turning in the wait for sleep and knocks him directly into unconsciousness.

He doesn't dream that night, though, for a brief moment, the leaded weight of his heart tricks him into thinking he may have. Instead, the heavy dread contradicts gravity and pulls him to the side, to where Phoenix is curled into his chest with a furrow between his brow and a silent plea caught in his lips.

A pale hand smooths his raven hair back. Tucks in wayward strands and promptly undoes its previous effort with a few scratches. Phoenix stirs, a bout of tension that slowly bleeds away, and opens his eyes for his gaze to meet Miles's after traipsing for an instant.

Miles swipes back that one persistent lock and presses a kiss to his forehead. A sad croon rumbles in Phoenix's throat, and he presses into that pair of lips, huddles closer, offering his whole being in a last ditch effort to make Miles stay.

"I will be back soon." He whispers.

Mia and Maya reinforce their promise to keep everything in order while he's away. Miles runs one final survey of his home and the lighthouse to ensure nothing could cause troubles he hasn't already given the sisters instructions on how to fix. When Gumshoe arrives, his happy mood at finally seeing Miles, the recluse, travel – even if the circumstances weren't optimal – infects the air and calms the worst of his worries, at least for the time being. Lana and Mia are civil, though they continue to avoid each other when possible, a fact that goes largely unnoticed through the gleeful atmosphere the Gumshoe-Byrde family brings and the upbeat marimba they syntonize on the radio.

At the docks, Meekins stops running around in the fashion of a headless chicken for a single second to wish him good morning, and disappears into the wheelhouse again, frantic as ever. Mia and Maya offer him handwaves – composed and energetic, respectively – and good luck on his travel. Phoenix tries to maintain a chipper look, but the falsity of it hurts Miles far more than the truth of the heartbreak he feels.

Perched on the gunwale, he watches his loved ones become tiny dots in the distance. Mia and Maya disappear first, their translucent forms rapidly mixing with the background. They still stand in place, however; the shimmer of Phoenix's tail denotes their location, and it is visible until the entire island becomes a grey splotch lost in the horizon.

"Pal." Gumshoe lands a hand on his shoulder. Miles suppresses a flinch. "They will be okay."

For the rest of the trip until mainland, from his first step on early mornings to the hammock at night, through the menial tasks the crew relegate to him in their gratefulness for an extra pair of hands, he mulls over those words. They will be okay, that's for certain; Miles trusts in their aptitude, knows they have done so before and would tackle the world head on again if that's what was asked. Besides, two of them are dead, one seemingly can't die, if the fragments of anecdotes Maya sometimes spills are any indication. What is the worst that could happen?

Instead, his worry takes the form of a younger woman. How a precise lash masks the anxiety of the hand wielding the whip. He doesn't know what to expect; having grown under the same ceiling – though it was suspended at different heights – he can understand the reasons behind her actions better than no one, but is incapable of predicting them. Thus, his

expectations turn murky and uncertain, his doubt exacerbated by the long time they've spent apart. Will he be received with as open of arms as Franziska can offer from under those restrictive frills, or will he be kept a whip's length away? In truth, he will consider himself blessed if she even deigns him worthy of her presence, what with how his trail was composed uniquely by that deplorable parting message. Everyday he curses himself for leaving that note and yearns for a way to rectify all the damage caused by him with it, but, until now, the magnitude of such harm inspired him to hide rather than to face it, to choose to stew in the familiarity of regret instead.

It was a cyclic thing, like the flow of waves in their perfunctory battling against the hull. The regret over what he refused to acknowledge, briefly cut by a sudden urge to act and correct, overshadowed by fear of whatever comprised the brunt of his actions, engulfed by a need to shield himself away as his comfort was cardinal, enveloped by a thick sheen of guilt at his resistance to remedying the consequences, one over the other in the movements of the ocean. Confined to run the same worn pathways and forever return to the same place.

In the Beagle canal, into the dawn of his second day of travel, they moor at the tiny conglomerate of houses called Puerto Williams, a city whose main pillar is the harbor it flourished around to nourish. In there, Miles meets people who haven't seen anything beyond the hundred odd buildings in that area and the forests surrounding them, who were born beholden to the prospect of sustaining that one harbor as their predefined purpose, oblivious and incurious of what there is after the craggy mountains imprisoning them. He looks at them, and though they seem perfectly happy with the spot they were given and grew to fill, he just feels miserable.

He shares a meal with the crew, hovering in the sidelines while they string easy conversation with a group who they seem to be friends with. There is a strong presence of Navy personnel in this city, due to the existing naval post, and he cannot be recognized; he has the slight impression that, were he to tell the officers the lighthouse wasn't actually left unattended, for his merman and ghost friends were taking care of it, they wouldn't be convinced. As soon as his bill is paid – something he insists on, even if Gumshoe offers to cover for everyone – he bids them a grateful farewell and hikes to the local airport.

It is a small thing, adequate to a small town, nothing more than a landing strip which must be more used to seeing cargo than people. There are a handful of workers present, and he makes the dismaying discovery that the next passenger flight would only be available in two week's time. His unwillingness to wait eclipses the need to preserve his dignity; with a bit more of spilling his heart than he would've otherwise opted for, the workers and pilot let him hitch a ride on a cargo flight that will be taking off in a little under fifteen minutes. Out of protocol, customs are performed, but fast and relaxed, more procedural than out of any genuine worry one would expect to find in the employees of a bigger terminal.

Inside the plane, Miles is suddenly grateful for his experience surveying marine wildlife. A stench of fish wafts in the air, seeping from the dozens of boxes carrying the most varied manner of seafood, and he is sure his acquired immunity is the sole thing keeping him from bolting out at this instant for a breath of fresh air. He huddles on the corner closest to the cockpit, where the smell is weakest, and tolerates the following three hours to Santiago.

Midway, the rattling stillness becomes a nuisance. He relocates to what seems to be the single window around, a square of thick glass roughly a foot in height and width, to watch the ant-like puniness of all that is beneath him move further and further away, observing with unseeing eyes and from somewhere near his body. That is, until he catches his mind in the act of fantasizing about the million ways this plane trip could end in tragedy, and peels himself apart from the wall.

By this point, the great greyed stain of Santiago is visible. It is a matter of minutes till arrival, something the pilot is kind enough to inform to his tripulation of one through the crackling intercom. Soon, the quakes intensify, thus, as precautionary measure for the landing and for no other reason, Miles makes himself a tight ball on the floor.

A crack, a thud, rushing air scratching the fuselage and they're on solid ground. He waits, curled, for the plane to come to a complete stop, when the idea of being seen in such a state forces him to stand up. The pilot guides him discreetly out, using the bustling crowd in their favor, and wishes the lost soul Miles is in his eyes good luck on whatever his endeavor may be.

It is thinking about that pilot, how, despite everything, good people still roam the streets with all the ones that are not, that he climbs into the back of a stake bed Chevy in the most surreptitious way he can. While pondering the options to reach his next destination, Santa Rosa de Los Andes, he overheard a middle aged man tell his companion of a supply he'd be taking to that exact city. To his chagrin, it was only after Miles had made up his mind and located the man's Chevy that he found out the delivery consisted of sacks of fertilizer. With no time to stagger and think twice, as the driver discarded his empty cup of coffee and began to approach, he hauled himself among the uncomfortable asperity of jute and prayed his clothes would be salvageable from this less-than-sacred amalgam of fish and manure. In this miserable situation wherein he must save to the last penny for any possible affliction in Europe, where the coin is more expensive, he has no alternative but to stomach this misery and silently protest with an everlasting grimace.

While his haphazard means of transportation doesn't provide him a comfortable trip, at least it's a quick one. In less than two hours, courtesy of what he suspects was unlawful speeding, he hops off at a brief stop the driver makes on the very border of the city. Miles prefers enduring the walk until his destination instead of lingering more than necessary and risk being found, since he most likely wouldn't have time to flee between the man parking the car and beginning to unload its cargo, and would rather pass on the humiliating ordeal that would be.

With his ratty backpack and unpleasant smell he has been numbed to, he meets the receptionist for a hotel with an equivalent glare. He persuades her into letting him shower in exchange for a small payment – a *bribe,* part of him revolts – and those minutes under the cold water and noisy showerhead might be as close to paradise as he will ever come to be. Taking advantage of her trust, which no amount of feeling bad for could overshadow his revulsion at the poor condition of his garb, he also makes good use of the washing machine and clothes-dryer made available for paying guests. His backpack, sadly, would still have a bit to endure before he can have it cleaned.

Afterwards, he sneaks out before any snobby patrons can catch sight of his sorry self polluting their space, in search of somewhere proffering a decent lunch. Options aren't lacking; he is familiar with the Transandine Railway, having researched the route in a bout of curiosity, led by a supposed decrease in transit at Cape Horn after it was opened as the Navy official who oversaw his job at the lighthouse mentioned in an offhanded comment. Santa Rosa de Los Andes is one of the main stops in the railroad that connects the Pacific to the Atlantic, climbing the cordilleras and running the plains from Valparaiso to Buenos Aires – the latter of which is his next goal –, and thus, it is a city for those who pass by rather than for those who stay. There is no shortage of hotels, restaurants, markets for replenishment and trivial entertainment for who has but a few short hours to spend before they are to leave.

That is not to say impermanency is a rule. To the contrary; when he finds a cozy establishment with inexpensive prices and a reasonable variety on the menu, the seat he picks in the balcony gives him a view of extensive greenery extending till where mountains rise. For every person that comes and goes, there is a crop that has stubbornly kept in place, proof that there is something keeping the city grounded which does not exist to serve the passengers as hotels and restaurants do. This perfect balance, this existence as a transitory place solid enough to allow one relaxation while sufficiently restless to permit their leave without hesitancy, is what makes it the ideal resting spot for travelers. A nomad, like Miles used to be, would find it nigh idyllic.

As for now, he feels no deeper appreciation of the sort, and plays his role as the ordinary traveler reveling in a warm lunch and beautiful sights.

At two in the afternoon, he boards the train. With the trip to Buenos Aires lasting for almost three days, he was assigned a bed – while he preferred to avoid the cheapest option for this specific circumstance, as that would entail crammed bunkbeds on the sides of the public corridor, his choice wasn't the picture of extravagance either. It is a suite on the smaller side, escaping the classification of 'claustrophobic' by a handful of square centimeters, which will have to be shared with another customer. For once, luck seems to be on his side; he doesn't take long to make acquaintances with his consort, who he is relieved to see is a sympathetic elder with a colombian Spanish who doesn't appear all too offended when Miles shows disinterest for conversation.

The next days run past in a smooth blur, Miles seldom leaving the room, plagued by the deep remorse of having prioritized his pockets instead of purchasing the plane tickets that would fly him from Santiago straight to Amsterdam. Nothing could have prepared him for the hellish shaking of the floor when the wagons traverse the special rack rails which steer it throughout any steeper ground, and when the worst has passed and they are on the safe plains beyond the Andes, the motion and the train became so closely associated in his brain the mere possibility of moving in his current environment invites nausea. He will be forever grateful for his elderly companion, who was so generous as to start bringing him food in the room when he noticed Miles's poor state, despite the lightkeeper's initial reluctance and near rudeness at showcasing his vulnerabilities.

In the platform of Retiro, his gratitude is clumsy in his mouth, too big or too small to fit between his teeth, so he thrusts a few bills at the befuddled elder and walks away with nary a word other than a monotonous 'adiós'.

A taxi ride dumps him at the entrance to the Ezeiza, the airport that will take him across the sea. His flight will leave in a few hours, time he would sorely regret not having spent appreciating the beauty of Buenos Aires if it weren't for the present political climate.

During his stay on Gumshoe's boat, though he wasn't able to get properly acquainted with the most recent news as the papers stayed at the lighthouse for his friends to peruse – Maggey called it 'endearing', how they adopted Miles's habits –, Lana thought it best to inform him of what could be pertinent. And, indeed, pertinent it was, because Brazil wasn't left lonely and Argentina now has its own coup d'état to speak of and make its neighbour company. No beautiful gardens or architectural wonder would turn the restless capital more tolerable than this bleak, concreted platform.

He winces at the realization Berlin might be in a similar condition. Maybe not as disturbed, but tensions have been high ever since it was split.

There was this place in Eastern Berlin where Miles and Franziska often went to spend the afternoons and dusks. In their sparse moments of free, unsupervised time, they dismissed the carriages and cars, ran through alleys and copses till the tip of Friedrichshain's tail, and knocked at the door of the nice old lady who offered them the freshest pastries she had retrieved from the oven just an hour ago. More than the delicious sweets, she allowed them access to the small observer tower in her house, which a rueful smile told them she had built for her and her deceased husband to watch the stars together. From there, with something to eat in hand, they would chat under the changing sky, and religiously fall into a sacred type of silence when the sun started to set behind Berlin, paint the sky in pink and the Spree River in orange flames.

They ceased their sporadic visits when their relationship became even closer to snapping, after Miles announced his decision of returning to the States to initiate his career on the other side of the Atlantic from her. He wonders whether she resumed without him there, or if it had become too bitter of an activity to do alone.

Caught in his musings, he loses the hour and makes it to the plane in the nick of time. The other passengers shoot him sidelong glances as he rushes across the corridor, annoyed at the slight delay and, subsequently, at him for being the cause of it. When the initial shaking of take off peters out into an unpleasant hum, Miles, exhausted by his scant hours of unrestful sleep in the train, falls unconscious.

When he awakens, more rested than he has felt in days – although that does not mean much, when the bar is being able to do something as simple as to stand without swaying – it is close to touchdown. Down there, he sees a reflection of the sky, with spangled grey and colorful dots where ships are serene amid rolling waves. More ahead, a conglomerate of those spots sits in a glaring hole on the carpets of green, signaling the imminent arrival at Amsterdam.

At midday, the plane comes to a stop. He follows the throng into the edifice and promptly breaks apart from it, weaving between the reunited couples and stern-looking businessmen in a beeline to the nearest exit. Despite his old tendencies, he despises traveling in these big centers, where the crowd is always buzzing regardless of the Sun's position – or lack of such – in the sky. How he feels trapped in the amorphous masses of people reduced to a name on

the back of a card, a photo in a passport, a couple notes exchanged to have just that little bit more space for their baggage.

His slumber during the flight will not power him for long, but should be able to fuel him until he strikes a room for the night. According to the Thomas Cook's he bought as soon as the airport had been rendered far enough to cease its influence on prices, there should be a train leaving for Berlin at dawn of the day to come.

He walks in the general direction of the central station, hoping to find some inn that is reasonably close and wouldn't cost him an arm and a leg while looking for something to eat. The assorted restaurants peppered along the streets didn't call to him; many were closed as they were participants of Amsterdam's rich night life, the remaining either too big for his pockets or far from attractive.

In the end, his aimless walk takes him neither to a hotel nor a diner, but to the lush middle of Vondelpark. He selects a bench in a shadowy corner of the rosarium, watching the people who've taken advantage of the gentle sun of summertime weave between the colorful flowerbeds. Though spring is gone and the blooms are quite past their prime, it remains a pretty sight, even more so with the renovations and improvements since Miles's last visit. Even during springtime he doesn't remember the roses being this colorful, and he is certain that the children's playground he's seen tucked in the trees is also a new and welcome addition.

The last time he's been here… yes, he can remember it clearly. It is a memory he avoided for what felt like eons, but now, isn't as painful as it used to be, and more bittersweet to reminisce on. The last time he's come it was at the behest of his then partner, a certain someone that dragged him on a trip even though there was an investigation to be conducted; after they ambled throughout the patchwork quilt of the peripheric canals, a visit to the Rembrandt House Museum a few ways away ended in a casual stroll in this very park.

He releases a long sigh, and his heart does something funny, that maybe he should have a cardiologist look into. Or not; he doesn't know if he can handle having someone look into his heart. He did, once, and it had a tragic, disastrous end.

"Look who's decided to show up." A gruff voice rises from behind him, and his soul leaves his body for a split second. Pivoting, the manifestation of his worst fears is standing there, in flesh and bone and that predatory, wolfish smirk. "It's been a long time, hasn't it, pretty boy?"

Miles, dumbfounded, cannot muster any reaction when Shi-Long plops beside him on the bench without asking for permission. He throws an arm behind the backrest, and turns to Miles with what's at once a lazy and analytical look, so sharp and so agonizingly familiar the lightkeeper feels something rip open inside his chest.

"So, tell me." He arches an eyebrow and prompts. "What's the princess been up to after her disappearing act? And no; no one was fooled by that shoddy note." His eyes narrow. Suddenly, Miles can't quite meet them.

“But you already knew that, didn’t you.” His voice becomes stern, the lack of a question mark obvious – the framing of it as a question is but a formality when Shi-Long knows how his cogs turn so well. He feels how the agent leans closer, how, even with nary another word, he demands an explanation with increasing intensity. It is a tactic he had often seen employed in long-winded interrogations. Miles doesn’t reply.

“Huh.” Shi-Long leans back. His appearance now breezy, he looks at the view ahead as if none of the last minutes have transpired, and nothing, not the resurrection of someone who should be long dead to him – even if not in a literal sense – nor his casual meeting with them, was amiss. Miles’s mistake is to think that means he got away; he should know by now that a wolf doesn’t let go of a bone after it’s bitten down on it.

“It’s a pity Panamanian airports don’t keep their records as tidy as other countries.” He casually says, waving an absent hand. “It was so easy to do the tracking work until there, but the moment we step out of the airport, there’s no scent to follow.”

“Chile.” Miles chokes out. “I am now working on a lighthouse in Southern Chile.”

Shi-Long hums, satisfied. “In the extreme, eh? Suits you.” He doesn’t elaborate, but the strong implication of his snide comment hangs there.

He’s angry. *Of course* he is; to an outside perspective, no matter how closely it might be looking at him from, his actions couldn’t have seemed like anything but an extreme overreaction. That’s what he earns, he figures, when he buries the details in his chest and refuses to share any information beyond the most superficial. They’re not to blame for crafting the most reasonable picture with the pieces they were given.

This is too much. Far more than he was expecting to deal with on this trip. This blatant shattering of his plans – it’s more than just bothersome. It hurts, with how Shi-Long’s presence sharpens old memories, so they cut at him and make him bleed all over again.

“I apologize, Agent.” He rises from the bench, swerves and almost falls over unsteady feet. “I appreciate meeting you again, but I should procure a hotel posthaste.”

Miles barely has time to pivot. “Not so fast!” Shi-Long exclaims while a hand clamps around his wrist. “Come on, Miles, you just got out of – a plane, surely? You can’t have eaten yet. Do me the honor of a meal; I know a decent café around here since you’re picky about restaurants.”

He gulps, and has no choice but to accept and follow Shi-Long as the agent leads the way. Regardless of how impressive, it frightens Miles; even after these years of no communication, Shi-Long still has that special ability to see right through him. With no verbal indication on his part, the man knew he had just arrived from a trip, could accurately guess it was a plane, affirmed with absolute trust in his knowledge of Miles’s inner workings that he had not eaten since landing, and offered a meal at a café, remembering an old comment of Miles’s about disliking Amsterdam’s restaurants and deducing that is yet to change – assumptions which are correct, correct, correct and correct.

Is this how it was supposed to be? Miles knows that Shi-Long enjoys Rembrandt like no one, that he has memorized to the last line of Lang-Zi's manuscripts and the opening of the scrolls is solely showmanship, that he has an extensive collection of vinyls inherited from a friend and is as loyal to his men as they are to him. That he has an abrasive personality, but is also observant and can recognize when it's to be toned down.

As they enter the café, Shi-Long holding the door open for him, his mind continues its recitations. *That, contrary to what his behavior would indicate, his hugs are gentle. That he runs warm as a furnace. That he is embarrassed about enjoying non-wolf related monikers. That he made Miles feel so, so loved-*

Shi-Long orders an espresso, and he blinks awake. He could swear Shi-Long was a man of mochas. After he requests a common latte, the agent steers him to a table in the corner by a window, and Miles frowns, because he thought the chosen spot would be in the middle of the establishment, where the rustle of chatting patrons is more pronounced. And when he launches into an anecdote about the younger sister of one of his subordinates' cousin, Miles is thrown for a loop, as he was certain Shi-Long would pressure him for something more than the crumbles of information the lightkeeper had provided.

Everything he retained about Miles, Miles doesn't think he had even learned about Shi-Long in the first place. Never did he have a similar ability to, with a little examination, deduce how he felt – how he would act, Miles couldn't fathom, and it was consigned for time to reveal.

"So, what was it that wrenched the lone wolf out of its territory and to these far away lands?" He asks, his cheek propped on a hand, an odd and undeniably soft look in his face. Miles feels himself melt, seeing the restoration of derelict memories he had left for decay to run its course.

"I came for 'Ziska."

"I figured." And Shi-Long winces. "Sis's been faring as well as you'd imagine. Trying to keep herself collected but snarling at whoever dares come too close."

"You've been in contact with her?"

"No. We caught each other's tails over at Hannover a few weeks back. Total accident, much like how I found you today. Hah! Lang Zi says: 'even after separated, members of a pack will always find each other'."

He materializes the scrolls to read aloud, exaggerated as he's always been. Miles is mortified to discover Shi-Long's antics are as endearing as ever, and when the man calls for him to follow if he has even a single second to spare – which are plentiful, after all, a hotel can be sought out later when the payment would be for an overnight rather than a full one-day stay – hesitancy rears its head for only an instant before it recedes. Again, in a mirrored image of six years ago, down to the location of resting patches of sunlight on the wood, he finds himself in the second floor of the Rembrandt House, being an attentive listener to his companion's ramblings on a work he has heard extensively about multiple times at this point.

The world's spinning must've accelerated – there is no other reason for the afternoon to have flown by at such a speed. When he realizes it, the Sun has just dipped behind the horizon, leaving behind some trails of reddened sunbeams that linger in the streets and awaken Amsterdam's nightlife. One by one, as the last of natural red fades, an artificial one flickers alight. Soon, Amsterdam is alive again, but this time around it blushes in warm tones and coyly calls for the amblers to come take part in these activities bound to nighttime. Which is why Miles is surprised to see they came to a standstill at the entrance to the hotel Shi-Long's staying at.

Thinking he again had misread Shi-Long's intentions, though he was sure the easy laugh and the proximity meant a desire for extending their shared time, he has parting words on his lips when, in a bold move, the agent rests a hand on his lower back.

It's searing, white-hot like branding iron. No one has dared touch him in such an intimate way, besides Phoenix, for years upon years. Before that, the one who dared was precisely this man, who, seeing no negative reaction, pulls him closer as if he was something worth having near, holding onto.

"Come with me." He whispers. Miles has no choice but to heed.

At the foyer, a short man stops in front of them. That gaze, prickling on Miles's fair skin, is topped by a couple of bushy eyebrows, kissing one another as a couple of impassioned caterpillars and crowned by a few rows of deep wrinkles. A spent cigarette wobbles on his mouth while he chews on it, in a gesture one would make when trying to refrain from being excessively rude while commenting on some perceived great affront.

"Mr. Lang," One of the few strands of hair on his head comes free when he tugs, in tandem with how the displeased frown on his face tugs at his features in a way that makes Miles's stomach turn. "Pardon me if I'm mistaken, but wasn't the downpayment done for one person?"

"Piss off." Shi-Long, incensed, spits. "My room's a double. Got plenty of space for the two of us there."

The man, who must be the owner or, at least, the manager, lifts an unimpressed eyebrow and an expectant palm. Even across the fluff encasing his mind Miles can recognize the unspoken threat of eviction, imminent if Shi-Long doesn't meet his demands, and to forestall any escalation of the circumstances he digs through his own pockets and offers what he finds, hoping it is sufficient. The host accepts it, counts the notes, lets them pass with a last scornful look of reprehension and mild disgust while tucking the money somewhere deep inside his suit jacket.

The hallways fill with a song and dance of quickstep, dress shoes clicking and swirling over the polished floor as Shi-Long guides him to his room in a hurry, yet to stop huffing in rage at the man cast off in the lobby. Miles lets himself be herded, and follows dutifully with the thing most akin to eagerness Miles Edgeworth is capable of – *like a puppy,* Shi-Long had said, once, when this exact same act was being performed in another place, in another time, both long lost.

A door opens; Shi-Long ushers him inside. The room is simple, although comfortable, wallpapered by a rosé backdrop patterned in a darker toned damasque, a mahogany dresser set underneath a meter wide mirror, a closet in the same style occupying the wall opposite to the entrance – save for the door which he assumes leads to the bathroom – and a shoe cabinet beneath a sequence of wall hooks. With, of course, a matching bed dressed in satin. Nothing extravagant, none of the enormous spaces and canopy beds belonging to the luxury Miles associates with the words 'Shi-Long', 'night' and 'together'.

The second the lock clicks in place, Shi-Long is on him. Miles gasps, pressed against the door that just closed, caged between it and his companion, two hands tight around his waist and a pair of lips on his.

Shi-Long doesn't kiss the way he remembers. It's still a bit of animal in its raw ferocity, but where it used to be possessive, it is now desperate. It's trying to reassure himself that Miles has never ceased to be his, knowing with heartbreaking certainty that that's a lie, a comforting one; a delusion. Shi-Long must feel similarly towards him; his lips turned rough from the cold he has become accustomed to, his waist filled out with the fat and muscle his depressive and stress-addled years in Europe hadn't allowed him to grow. His delicate features – worn down, replaced. His doll-like fragility, gone.

Nevertheless, his hands find one of Shi-Long's own and the back of the man's neck in his quest to reciprocate this reenactment of the past.

That's what this is, Miles concludes while Shi-Long wrests them both backwards and they meander aimlessly in the room, blind to their surroundings, legs tangling together in asynchrony. He was intending to call it a mishap of time; a moment that lost itself and somehow came to be in the present – but a reenactment is a much more apt description. This is not a perfect image of what used to be; they have changed too much for it to be so. This is a performance of two people paying homage to what has passed, one doing so as a manner to honour it, well aware that it's been eaten by eternity, the other begging for a second act, a chance to, if continuing it is impossible, create something better.

They trip, and though Miles doesn't plummet to the floor, he falls into Shi-Long's heart. The agent, lounging on the bed he has just landed onto, rearranges himself to fix a tender look on Miles, purr out a plea voiced in the tone of an order.

"Come." He beckons. "Lay with me."

Miles wishes he could be honest to Shi-Long, for once; that he could look him in the eyes and explain he doesn't love him neither as much nor as strongly as before without feeling his insides tearing apart. But he doesn't think he can bear to watch his heart shatter a second time – even less to be the force driving the hammer into it once more.

Tonight. Just for tonight, he'll let this part of his past be unburied and indulge in it, for Shi-Long and himself. Tomorrow, the early birds will see him lugging his suitcase on the streets, searching for a safe spot from where he can watch the sunrise.

Miles's alarm clock, put on the bedside table, tics in peace in the terse room. Its pointers signal a few minutes after midnight.

A few stray beams of moonlight make it across the curtains. A daring one climbs the bed, licks Miles's arm and Shi-Long's chest.

Both men lay motionlessly, sprawled on their backs and gaze cast at an undetermined point on the ceiling, apart from each other so not even their pinkies touch. The bed is hot, somewhat moist. The sheets are rumpled and the satin blanket – both red, of course; there is no situation more romantic – rests pulled askew on top of them.

Now that the height of the pleasure is gone, it has left them feeling hollow. The space it filled meant for love to occupy once it fizzled out, empty; Miles expected it, but this foreknowledge was a mere warning, and it was naive to think it would be able to shield him from the maws of that feeling when it came hunting for him. And it is a lack of love, he knows; which is why he doesn't understand why Shi-Long refuses to acknowledge it as such.

In spite of what the agent thinks, he doesn't love Miles anymore – there was no love in what they just did, requited or not. Yet, he clings to the thought that he does even if it directly contradicts his heart, all for what? For rekindling their relationship? With a man he doesn't love, and who doesn't love him in return? It is a futile endeavor, which will only bring anguish while it's sought and misery if achieved. Those embers were just that, embers, and once the flames died neither of them could push more wood in. There's nothing left to kindle or rekindle.

Shuffling sounds. The glacial wall dividing them thins, but doesn't disappear when Shi-Long speaks up, acceptance underlined with a hurt Miles caused and doesn't know if he will ever be able to heal.

"You'll run away."

It isn't a question, but an affirmation. Miles is not surprised; Shi-Long, much like a certain merman, has a knack for reading him with seamless ease. It is a curious coincidence, that the ones able to do so are both predators; what could that mean? Is it the fangs tearing the flesh and the truth out of him? Is it the hunter's gaze that does not leave a thing unseen? Is it an ability to smell it in the air?

"I know it. I saw it in your eyes – that look, I could never forget it. I spent some of the best moments of my life under it, and, now, it's passing straight through me. You have something else. *Someone* else."

Miles ignores the issue. Ignores how his heart twinges as his mind invokes how, right now, he would likely be on some far off corner of the island with a merman he's wheeled along, indulging in a book under the shifting yellow of a lampion, if only he'd stayed. Instead, he finally addresses what has been plaguing his thoughts in regards to Shi-Long perhaps the most, forcing out a half-hearted "It's been too long for you to know such things."

Shi-Long tsks. “Lang Zi says: ‘no matter how far a wolf strays from its pack, the others will always remember its smell’. You’ve changed, yes, but some things never do.”

On that, the lightkeeper has to agree. Shi-Long used to sneer and call Miles a cynical bastard when he said it, but regardless of that and his uprooted worldview, it is one thing the lightkeeper maintains: not everything reaches a satisfactory conclusion – in fact, most things don’t.

His love for Shi-Long just happened to coincide with the moment where nothing – not Shi-Long, not Phoenix, not Franziska, maybe only, *only* his father – would be able to make him stay, and when he was recovered and capable of coming back, his love had waned enough for him to not consider the effort worth it. It’s petty and mundane like that, because the world is petty and mundane – subsequently, so are people. There's not much Miles can do about it beyond moving on with a healthy dose of self-reflection and trying to right his wrongs where he can; Shi-Long, how they parted ways, is a wrong he doesn't quite know how to right as of yet.

Cutting the silence, he speaks once more. However, now it isn’t masked as the offer of a choice, an order, or even left unspoken. Now, Shi-Long fills his lungs and it is not to bark or growl but to *beg.*

“Stay. Just this night. This once.” *Because you never have,* he doesn’t say. Miles can hear it all the same.

Just this night, this once, Miles stays.

The bed is cold. Miles wrenches his eyes open to see his own hand, the pillow, and a bunched blanket.

The coat hanger has been deprived of the black jacket it held. The pair of boots in the shoe rack by the door are now reduced to a couple of dirty prints on wood. The bathroom, empty; the spot on the closet which housed a black suitcase, even more depressingly so.

Miles huffs a droll laugh. Of course, the man would find a way to get back at him, wordlessly convey his anger at Miles’s antics in a manner that stings as it drives his point home with no room for interpretation.

In a few short moments the lightkeeper is ready to go, uneasy at the void space around him and wanting to leave that emptiness as soon as possible. In the hallways, the walls seem bleaker, and the desperation to leave this suffocating hotel is such that he startles a good foot into the air when a hand grabs his wrist on the way out. Its hold is just sufficiently strong to stop him in his hurry and, as soon as whoever it belongs to ascertains they’ve caught his attention, it weakens and vanishes.

“Gentleman.” A squeaky voice addresses him. Its owner, as well as of the offending hand, is the man from the previous day, who he can now register with further clarity: old, bald and reeking of cigar. The manager’s uninterested eyes meet his, and he raises a nondescript vinyl cover, beige card paper with a rough texture from age and fraying at the edges. “Your *partner,”* And Miles despises the way the word rolls off his tongue, emphasized in a condescending jeer. “-Left this in the reception to be passed on to you, Sir.”

The lightkeeper warily accepts it – whatever Shi-Long could’ve left him is an enigma. The man valued his collection of vinyls like no one, to a degree of love Miles hadn’t even known could be directed at inanimate objects when the sentiment was not yet understood by him. Sliding it out of its protection, it is a simple model: sepia with the label a blue sky peppered by painted clouds, a few scratches here and there. No identification – no name, no singer, no composer, no serial number. Its content is all that speaks of its identity.

Tucked in a corner of the hall, near a couple crimson sofas and a well-cared for plant, is a small table sporting a gramophone. “May I make use of that?” Miles asks, gesturing to the machine. The host’s face scrunches up a little and he runs a meticulous inspection of the environment, searching for anyone else. Seeing no other patrons who could be displeased by the music, he offers a ‘go ahead’ in an absent wave of the hand and retreats before the lightkeeper can muster an acknowledgement.

He slots the vinyl in place and sets the needle, with a delicacy he seldom let surface. His finger brushes over the button once, twice. On the third time, it presses.

A pleasant tune emanates from the horn, lighting a sparkle of recognition in Miles, soon followed by a rich, feminine voice.

“We’ll meet again,” The soft croon emanates from the horn. Something inside him twists in agony.

“Don’t know where,” It continues, woven by the constant spinning, a motion Miles feels enthralled by. *“Don’t know when.”*

Miles, despite being skittish and a recluse, sometimes pried his bones apart and held his ribcage open for Shi-Long to see within. It was the utmost display of trust he could fathom then, and why, as soon as the agent tried to hold his heart and fix what was wrong or tore open his own chest, he shied away with revulsion crawling under his skin. It was a bit of a habit of his, an awful one of locking himself behind seven locks for reasons big or obnoxiously small. They didn’t just frustrate Shi-Long’s innumerous – and many times irksome – tries of reaching out to him, as they also barred him from any attempt at reciprocation. For all the hands that Shi-Long extended to him, Miles never once took them or offered one back, as an interest for the man as strong as the one Shi-Long demonstrated for him never sparked in his being.

What that ended in was Shi-Long’s almost clairvoyant readings of him, and his complete inability to respond in kind. So he can’t quite gauge whether that song, the melodious cries of *“We’ll meet again, some sunny day”* are meant to be heard as the singer’s longing croons or a sardonic approximation in the agent’s voice.

Is this a genuine desire or a last punch? Does he sincerely wish to meet Miles again, someday when they've both grown into better men, and Shi-Long's appetent fascination is met with open acceptance the same way Miles's unloving sentiments will have stopped to hurt as badly? Or was the goal plainly to torture the lightkeeper so he aches as much as him? Miles cannot decipher whatever Shi-Long's intentions were in abandoning such a prized item to his possession, and that absolutely terrifies him.

He stops the disc. Takes it out and looks at it, for a moment, a couple more, lets the seconds run along the circular grooves in a sluggish crawl. He can hear the small man lumbering behind him, around the reception's desk, and before he can be billed for some made up rule dictating an individual is not to loiter on the halls – undoubtedly so the owner can be rid of his presence, that is 'sullying the environment' –, the disc returns to its paper confines. Miles stuffs it in his backpack, in the back where it isn't under any danger of being bent or poked, and walks out.

There are still a couple hours to spend until his train is to depart, and if he were a braver man, he could've done well on yesterday afternoon's hopes and invited Shi-Long for an amicable stroll, maybe a trip to a nearby café he would've tricked the man into footing the bill of in light of his newfound poverty. They could've chatted about the recent developments in Interpol, and though Shi-Long would've been resistant to reveal classified information at first, Miles would've worked his – as dubbed by the agent himself after their relationship had progressed past the 'prosecutor wiles' phase – 'siren spell' to fish answers out of him, bit by bit, until they were engrossed in an animated discussion that unraveled the case till no mystery remained.

So many things could've and would've, but Miles is a coward, and he suffocated to the last of these possibilities to death before they could've even begun to dream of becoming reality.

The Holland-Scandinavian Express is comfortable, a safe and soft enough place he can release all his thoughts away like how he used to do with fireflies as a child, gathering one by one in his tiny hands to throw them into the night and watch the little dots scatter in the wind, distinguishable from the stars solely in that they moved far too fast to be stuck to the sky.

He was supposed to board off in the Southern station, near Berlin's Zoo, to walk around and look beyond the bars at the shapes of old memories, thinking that basking in some of the few happy moments common to him and his sister would be of help to calm his heart. Instead, he steps out in the one immediate after, inside the gravitational center of the city, and buys a pack of the cheapest cigarettes.

It is a nasty addiction, something he was more than glad to have had success in ditching. It seems, however, that some last dregs of it were lurking still.

The mattress of the inn picked for the night – the first one he came across, averse as he was to remain outside for more than strictly necessary – might be the worst one he's ever had the displeasure to lay on; he tosses, restless in spite of his exhaustion. Although, it isn't because of the bed. Or the drunkards beneath his window, or the creaks of the ceiling boards settling even as it seems they've been here in this house for far longer than he's been on this Earth.

It takes him an hour of turning until he realizes this is the first time in years that he's slept alone.

At the lighthouse, Phoenix purred in his chest, his neck, all over him in how his long body vibrates in synchrony with his content song. In the Transandine, the elder looked after him during his unrestful and nightmare-riddled hours of torpor. In the plane, he had been surrounded by others, the couple behind him who chatted for the entire flight and the woman by his side who whistled a short tune from time to time. In his stay at Amsterdam, despite the proverbial distance, Shi-Long was there. Warm and alive, sharing the same mattress, the same collective unconsciousness in the darkest hours of the night.

Here, he is alone.

Completely, utterly alone.

Chapter End Notes

Yes this Miles has love handles no I'm not accepting opposing opinions on it. He's a healthy, strong boy now. (If anyone cares, my envisioned body type for him at this point in the fic is somewhat similar to [not exactly, but approaching] what you'll usually find on male fitness guides as 20% body fat. Strong and a bit bulky. Constantly carrying heavy things [Phoenix, among other items] around and walking a bunch surely has its benefits.)

Hope Lang didn't sound too horribly out of character. I've only played AAI1 till present moment and, besides the fact I'm not very familiar with him, he's quite difficult to get right.

Theoretically, Miles's travel route *should* be possible. The only part I'm pretty sure about, though, is the Buenos Aires-Berlin portion of it. I managed to sneak in some specifics because the Thomas Cook and the Airline Guide are actually available on the internet. They're somewhat confusing and I took a while to get the hang of them, but they're very fun to peruse (+ the whole site is very interesting in general, and worth checking out if you can get it to load K). You can find Miles's train on table 20, page 64 of Thomas Cook's and his plane on the South American section of page C-620 (KLM Royal Dutch Airlines) of the Airline Guide (I even matched the days, if you look at 1966's calendar! What happens when you're an unemployed teenager with an obsession). As for the Transandine, I could only find the timetables for South American railways from 1981, which is far enough I preferred to not use it.

Also, I'll leave here my note of dissatisfaction towards the british National Archives for requiring me to pay to access a map of the main railway trunks of South America. Although it wouldn't be of use to me anyway since it is from 1893, when I was researching South American railways pretty much the first map Google threw back at

me was from there, and I was pretty disheartened at the fact you have to pay a minimum of £8.40 to access it. I was very disappointed to see this gatekeeping of knowledge.

Thank you all for reading :] !!

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